THE MAN WITH THE SCAR

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THE MAN WITH THE SCAR

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BY

JOHN LOMAS

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CHAPTER I

HOW GROUCHY BEGAN HIS TRAVELS IN A BASKET TRUNK

John Cormack Grouchy, financier and reputed millionaire, smiled contentedly behind his heavy black beard as, leaning idly against the deck-rails, he watched the last few passengers come aboard. Certainly their appearance verged upon the comic. Approaching out of the dark night into the circle of thin light which surrounded the ship, they resembled a straggling procession of ghosts; but ghosts with umbrellas, ulsters, rugs, and suit-cases, articles hitherto unknown in the world of shadows. Not until they had clambered up the gangway and stepped onto the deck itself did they materialise—and then with surprising suddenness—into full-blooded human beings.

But it was not the curiously wraithlike appearance of his fellow-travellers that provoked Grouchy's smile. He followed their movements with his eyes, but his thoughts were far away. He was thinking of the business which had

brought him over to France two days back and congratulating himself upon its extremely satisfactory termination. The contracts had been signed, concluding the deal upon terms infinitely better than the most confirmed optimist could ever have anticipated—terms that amply justified his obvious delight. A ridiculous sum, he thought, had been paid him for the properties he had sold.

But Grouchy by nature was no plunderer. It was not the bare acquisition of money that delighted him to this extent. There was another and more solid reason for his satisfaction. He suffered from excessive vitality, finding little in humdrum business life to satisfy the imaginative and impetuous activity of his mind and body. Only on very rare occasions did his work provide him with the stimulant his nature required; for the most part it bored him—the mixed French and Irish blood which ran in his veins demanded stronger fare. At times, however, when a delicate deal of really first-rate importance was on hand, he would enter the negotiations with surprising zest. Single combat, wit pitted against wit, he dearly loved. On these rare occasions his eyes would shine with the glint of battle, and the business assumed the nature of a thrilling, romantic struggle for mastery, with a bargain to do duty for the laurel wreath wherewith to crown the victor in the Homeric bout. The deal he had just completed had been one that in his eyes had assumed this fanciful nature. And he had been staggeringly successful.

'Sixty thousand pounds!' he soliloquised

slowly, dwelling on each word. 'Sixty thousand pounds for the mineral rights over a few square miles of territory, tucked away in an inaccessible corner of Africa! It's extravagant! Ridiculous! There are no minerals there—nothing but sand and sterile rock for miles deep—not even water.' He chuckled as he unconsciously followed with his eyes the vague outlines of two belated male passengers who came hurrying towards the vessel, followed closely by a sailor, groaning and sweating heavily, despite the bitter wind, under the burden of many bursting suitcases. 'They can dig, and dig, and dig, and——'

'It'll be a stormy crossing to-night, sir!'

Grouchy's meditations were sharply interrupted by a rough voice close to his ear.

'What's that?' he asked. He had heard every word distinctly, but had not yet had time to collect his thoughts sufficiently to enable him to attach any meaning to the commonplace remark.

'It'll be a very bad crossing, sir. The worst we've had for years, or I'm mistaken.'

Grouchy turned in the direction whence the voice came, and found a sailor standing at his elbow.

'Yes, I suppose it will be,' he casually replied, glancing round and noticing for the first time how bitter and tempestuous the weather was.

The sailor spoke again insinuatingly: 'I'll be round about your cabin during the night, sir, if you want anything. You're the gentleman in Number 3?'

'That is the number of my cabin, I think,' Grouchy answered. Then, suddenly perceiving

the unexpressed intention of the sailor's remark, he smiled and added: 'But I shall not be requiring your assistance during the night. I like it rough. The rougher it is the better. That's why I always travel on this route, even in the winter time. It's from choice; I enjoy the long crossing. There is nothing to beat the sea, especially the heavy seas in a small seaworthy boat. No, you're doomed to disappointment. I may look like a landsman, but I am more at home at sea. And—to answer your point precisely—I have never been seasick in my life.'

The sailor surveyed Grouchy critically. He saw before him a fine-looking man, above average height, upright and broad-chested, with thick black hair and a black square-cut beard which, innocent of a single thread of silver, gave him the appearance of comparative youth. Even the deep lines that furrowed the hairless portions of his face, and marked him as being well past middle age, could do little to gainsay that look of healthy vigour. The sailor was impressed, and seemed to be convinced by his survey that he had been told the truth. The hopeful expression vanished from his face, and he looked at Grouchy dejectedly.

'But it's going to be worse than any other crossing you've ever had,' he said almost persuasively, a faint suggestion of hope still lingering in his voice. 'You'll probably find the sea a less pleasant hobby than you think before the night's out.' He paused. But meeting with no further response, he added abruptly: 'Passengers are ordered to their cabins before we leave the shelter

here. Help you with your luggage at Southampton, sir.' And he turned on his heel and moved off in search for more seedy-looking passengers who might provide remunerative custom for his nocturnal services.

A short while later, when Grouchy was again deeply lost in his meditations, a loud clatter and a few rhythmic shouts announced that the gangway was being cast off; at the same moment the steam whistle signalled that the time for departure had arrived. Slowly the steamer moved away from the quay and headed for the main stream of the Seine; a few minutes later she was well under way.

As the vessel rounded the headland which shields the Port of Havre from the north-easterly gales and stood out for the open sea, the accuracy of the sailor's forecast became increasingly apparent. Grouchy contemplated the portents with delight. It was going to be a rough passage. Even in the shelter of the harbour it had been obvious that there would be a heavy sea running, but he had never anticipated such a splendid storm as this. The clouds were scudding low; a little distance from the boat they appeared almost to be brushing the sea itself. The wind was lashing the waves into a white fury. The ship quivered and creaked under the force of its hostile blows; every taut rope in the rigging was set singing, and every slack one furiously whipping against adjacent spars. And this was but a foretaste of what might be expected in mid-Channel. Grouchy was genuinely delighted.

Most of the passengers had retired to their

cabins before the steamer had left the quay. They had needed no order to take them there. Fearing the worst of this wild night and while they still had their minds and bodies free for such considerations, they had settled themselves down as comfortably and securely as possible, with many bolsters and pillows wedged round them to stop their rolling about. Unlike these timid creatures, Grouchy remained on deck, revelling in the fierce weather. His statement to the sailor had been no idle boast; he loved the sea. Down in a small village on the Cornish coast he kept a speedy, sensitive, ten-ton yacht. Whenever he had an opportunity he would slip away from town and spend whole days at a stretch in it. In any season and in any weather in which sailing was humanly possible, he would go out. The few fisher-folk who were the only other inhabitants of that tiny place would shake their heads gravely sometimes when he went sailing. Sooner or later, they were certain, he would find a watery grave. But he never heeded their warnings, and always returned to laugh at them for their fears.

It was only at such times that Grouchy felt he was really living to the full. There was something strangely God-like in man, fighting and mastering the elements, a sensation of vital power that could be experienced under no other conditions. Long after all the other passengers had left the deck, Grouchy still remained there, standing firmly against the wind and the sting of the spray, revelling in the sight of the stout little vessel riding the great waters, defying the wind and sea, and holding steadfastly on her course.

But soon after the ship had gained the open sea, he, too, was unceremoniously hustled into his cabin. His appeal to be allowed to remain on deck was of no effect. It was too dangerous to-night for landsmen, he was curtly informed. He retired, complaining loudly that he was being treated like a woman, and indignantly settled himself down on the couch in his stuffy cabin. Wrapping some rugs round him to prevent his being thrown suddenly to the floor, he lay down to read or doze as the mood should take him.

But Grouchy was thoroughly irritated by this unnecessary confinement. On a night like this he disdained the bunk, refusing to undress and attempt to sleep. Secretly he promised himself that, later in the night, when there would be fewer men on watch, he would slip out of his cabin and regale himself again on deck.

For an hour or two he strove obediently to control his impatience, for the most part grimly concentrating his attention on his book; at times, laying it down to fight over again in his mind the successful negotiations of the last few days. But in the end, both these diversions wearied him. He became more and more restless with the deep rushing of the wind and the shock of the great waves upon the ship sending their constant and seductive message to his senses. At last he could bear it no longer. Throwing down his book, he got up. He pulled on an ulster, crammed a soft hat well down on his ears, and prepared to make another sortie out onto the deck.

He switched off the cabin light, then, hanging onto the door with both hands lest a sudden gust

of wind should slam it and attract the attention of some interfering, dictatorial officer, he opened it slowly. Peering out, Grouchy could see no one about in the dim light of the deck. He stepped out, shutting the door quietly behind him.

The sailor who had spoken to him while the boat still lay by the quay at Havre had proved himself an excellent prophet. The great wind, piercingly cold, had now worked itself up to gale force. The sea was running at its highest. But the ship was still struggling valiantly and successfully. Steadily she ploughed her way on her course, head on into the teeth of the storm, ducking her bow under the crest of nearly every wave, but rising again bravely to shake herself free of the water which swept along her decks.

Grouchy crept forward to where the storm was striking the ship with its full force. He laughed as he stood there, with knees slightly bent to balance himself upon the pitching deck, leaning his weight against the wind, but otherwise unsupported against the fierce strength of the gale.

'Strike on! Expend your fury on us, Sea! Futile! Futile!' he cried exultingly, as the mountainous waves swept by. This was magnificent!

But at that very moment, as if in answer to his derisive challenge, a wave mightier than the rest rose up before him and hurled itself upon the ship. Grouchy was caught unprepared. It reached the deck where he stood. Sweeping along, it knocked his feet from the slippery boards, and before he could find a friendly stay to grip, carried him with it on its wild rush. But his luck was in.

He was saved by the deck-rail some yards away, and rose out of the scupper, soaking, but still laughing defiantly, having suffered no worse injury than the loss of his old hat, which had vanished into the night.

Quite untamed, he began to advance again upon the post from which he had been driven. But he was stopped by a shout from an unseen officer or sailor, who, evidently attracted by Grouchy's ringing laughter, had hastened to see who had been fool enough to venture out upon the deck.

'It's not safe,' the man cried, seeing Grouchy dimly a few yards away. 'Get back to your cabin! I thought that was some one gone overboard. We don't want any accidents. Go back!'

Grouchy, much dejected, slunk back to his cabin, without a word of protest, but bitterly disappointed at being robbed of his innocent amusement. It was no use refusing to obey, he thought, or attempting to explain to these men. They did not understand the zest of life. The sea was their business; and thrilling entertainment is out of place in routine. They could not be expected to appreciate his point of view.

After drying himself as best he could, he grimly settled down again to his book. But he found it now more dull and wearisome than before. After a while, he flung it aside and lay down. Dull! This confinement was intolerable. Later on, he determined, he would risk it and creep out again on deck.

But the long day, the tiring journey, and the excitement had done their work. Within a few minutes he was sleeping soundly.

As the steamer entered the Solent, the sea and wind became less violent in their onslaught. Taking advantage of the comparative lull, two men quietly left their cabin, next door but one to Grouchy's, and, slipping along the short intervening space of deck, halted outside the door of the latter. And while one kept a watchful eye along the deserted deck, the other turned the handle of the cabin door, then slowly, and with infinite care, opened it a few inches. Peering through the slit so formed, he could see Grouchy lying fast asleep on the couch. There he lay, fully dressed, in that position still in which slumber had first overtaken him, one arm resting loosely across his forehead, where it once provided a shield for his open eyes from the oppressive glare of the electric light. The light still blazed down upon him. The intruder, apparently reassured by the sight of such sublime unconsciousness, now opened the door sufficiently wide to allow the passage of his body and boldly stepped inside, followed by his companion as by his shadow.

In the brightness of the cabin the features of the two newcomers could be distinguished. The first was a man of striking appearance. He was a big man, tall and broad, with raven-black hair that shone with oil and artful brushing. He was fashionably dressed, a monocle which he wore in his left eye giving him an almost dilettante air. His features, too, were good, clear-cut, well-proportioned, and strong. But they were somewhat marred by two unfortunate things: thick, sensual lips upon which there flickered a sour, unpleasant smile, and a red, angry scar of semi-

circular shape which ran into his hair, high up over his left temple. Together with the black hair and full red lips, the scar attracted the eye and accentuated the noticeable sallowness of his complexion.

His companion was a man of commonplace type; of rough, loose build and plebeian features, high cheek-bones and hollow cheeks, and a thin fair moustache which drooped shabbily over the corners of his mouth. Unlike the first man, he would have attracted no attention at all but for one curious deformity. The lower lids of his eyes sagged down to such an unnatural extent that they seemed to impart a cadaverous expression to his whole face, lending it a morbid interest quite unwarranted by the ordinary character of his remaining features.

When both these intruders were inside the cabin, the man with the curving scar—who appeared to control the proceedings—signed to his companion to close the door. That done, without disturbing the cabin's sleeping occupant, he drew from his pocket a small bottle and a wad of cotton-wool. Over the wool he sprinkled a few drops of liquid from the bottle. Then, very gingerly, and taking the greatest care to avoid casting his shadow over the sleeper's face, he leaned forward and placed the moist cotton-wool upon the cushion close beside Grouchy's nose. Then he withdrew a pace, and crouched down with his hands thrust out before him, his fingers extended clawlike, as though ready at the slightest signs of returning consciousness to fling himself upon Grouchy and stifle any cry of alarm.

But the alert attitude was unnecessary. Grouchy, breathing deeply, slept on. Once indeed he did choke slightly, and for a fleeting moment threatened to awake. Slight though it was, the noise made both his watchers lurch forward. But when it came to nothing they were able to check themselves before they had fallen upon the sleeping man.

Minutes passed, and the sweet, sickly odour of chloroform floated up, spreading thickly through the confined atmosphere of the cabin. Never for a moment did the two men relax their attitudes of strained caution and attention. But at last the man with the scar, rising to his full height and smiling sourly down upon Grouchy, leaned over him and roughly thrust the wad of cotton-wool hard against his nostrils. Then he heaved a sigh of relief and nodded affably to his companion, as though to say: 'There! That's our only difficulty overcome. The rest will be simplicity itself.' For a short while longer he held the wool in position against Grouchy's nose. Then he calmly rolled the drugged man over onto his back, remoistened the wool with some fresh drops from the bottle and spread it firmly over Grouchy's nose and mouth.

'Now—quickly! The trunk!' he whispered in a commanding undertone to his companion, who left the cabin as noiselessly as he had come.

As soon as the other had gone, the man with the scar drew a length of thin cord and some broad rolls of bandage from his pocket. Then, having raised Grouchy's feet from the couch and placed a small suitcase under them so that the

legs should remain clear of the couch, he proceeded calmly and dexterously to bind them tightly together. This accomplished, he rolled Grouchy onto his face and performed a similar operation on his arms behind his back. Finally, raising Grouchy's head, he passed innumerable turns of soft bandage round it, over the mouth. Then he stepped back and stood surveying his work, a sarcastically appreciative smile playing on his thick lips.

'You might call me over-conscientious in my work, my dear Grouchy,' he murmured drily; 'but it is as well to make quite certain. The anæsthetic alone should keep you quiet at least twice as long as I require. Yet, in these matters, one cannot be too careful.'

As he spoke, the door of the cabin opened and the other man reappeared, dragging behind him a large and cumbersome basket trunk. This he placed beside the couch and opened. Then the two men lifted Grouchy from the couch and, by dint of doubling his knees close up under his chin, squeezed him into the open trunk.

'Trussed first and now *en casserole!*' exclaimed the man with the scar quite loudly, his coarse lips paling as they stretched to form a broad grin. At the sound of his voice his companion looked up anxiously and made a motion enjoining a discreeter silence. But the warning only provoked a defiant repetition of the same remark, spoken this time more loudly than before and emphasised by a contemptuous shrug of the shoulders.

When the lid of the trunk had been securely

fastened down with two stout straps and a formidable padlock, the man with the scar peered out of the cabin door to see that no one for the moment was about outside. Reassured on this point he and his companion, lifting the trunk between them, stepped out of the cabin. They slid the trunk a yard or two along the deck and brought it to rest close against the deck-rails opposite the cabin out of which they had first appeared. Here the man with the scar heaved a deep sigh of contentment at the successful conclusion of the first stage in his mysterious task and, sitting down on the trunk, began unconcernedly to converse with his companion as they awaited the arrival of the boat into Southampton Harbour.

By now the channel steamer was no more than a short half-hour's run from the end of her voyage, and the northeasterly gale, having begun to drop, the sea, though rough, was becoming calmer with each passing knot. It was still dark, but presently a few passengers, those probably who had spent an intolerable night and welcomed the increasing steadiness of the boat with inexpressible joy, were beginning to move about the decks. To those others who were as yet too sleepy or too ill to move the stewards were administering refreshing cups of tea. The man with the scar had completed his work none too soon; for presently a steward knocked at the door of Grouchy's cabin and stepped inside.

'We'll be in dock directly,' he began loudly as he went in; 'but there's no great hurry. The boat-train doesn't leave for—' He broke off

suddenly, realising that there was no one in the bunk.

The two men sitting not far away on the basket trunk watched and listened intently. They exchanged meaning glances, and the man with the scar winked as the steward came out of Grouchy's cabin, looked up and down the deck for its vanished occupant, but, not seeing him, wasted no further time and continued on his round.

A few minutes passed, and then a sailor approached Grouchy's cabin and rapped loudly on the door.

'I'll be taking your bags as soon as they're ready,' he called out, and stood with one ear close to the door, listening for an answer. No answer was vouchsafed him. He knocked louder, repeated the observation, and again listened. There was still no response. He turned away, grumbling inaudibly. But as he turned he noticed the two men seated on the large trunk near by. They looked more hopeful, he thought. He approached them and tendered his services as porter. He met with another rebuff.

'I have already engaged two men,' said the man with the scar, 'and they will be enough. There is only this.' He tapped the trunk beneath him. 'We can manage the small things ourselves. Besides, you appear to have one job already.' And he nodded his head in the direction of Grouchy's cabin.

'Perhaps, and perhaps not,' replied the sailor gloomily. 'Can't make him hear. I expect he is too ill to move. I know their sort. He was talking to me at Havre, boasting to me how he

liked it rough. Well, he's had it rough all right. You mark my words; he'll leave the ship on a stretcher and the ambulance man will cart his luggage away. I often come across the likes of him.' The sailor turned on his heel and went off, still complaining. But after he had gone a few paces he turned and, jerking his head across his shoulder towards the port side of the ship, called back: 'Land off that side.'

As the vessel entered the docks, the activity on board increased. The few passengers who were up clustered in knots on the port side where the deck-rails were already run back, leaving a gap to receive the gangway the moment the vessel should be securely berthed. The first faint indication of approaching dawn glimmered on the horizon in the east and the outlines of great black individual clouds could be dimly distinguished by their fringes of the deepest grey.

The end of the voyage came rapidly. Soon the ship was being dragged into her berth, and all the sailors who had managed to find the means of earning a few pence for porterage were crowding on the port side, ready to jump ashore with their loads immediately the gangway had been run up. Behind them gathered the passengers, watching the proceedings with interest and no doubt, after such a night, yearning to plant their feet on solid earth once more.

But the two men still sat on the basket trunk against the rails on the starboard side of the cabin deck. Near them now hovered two sailors like vultures, waiting to swoop down upon the trunk and carry it ashore. But the man with the

scar seemed in no haste and had just curbed their eagerness. He disliked being jostled in a crowd, he had remarked, and would wait where he was until the other passengers had disembarked.

When the crowd by the gangway has dispersed, he rose, stretched himself, and motioned the waiting sailors to remove the trunk. Then he and his companion stepped into their cabin, emerging a moment later with a suitcase and some wraps. They turned in leisurely fashion to follow the departed trunk. But as they stepped away, a sailor, the one whom they had watched knocking at Grouchy's door only a short while before, hustled past them and again went up to Grouchy's cabin. He knocked loudly and impatiently upon the cabin door.

'Your bags, sir,' he cried. 'All the other passengers are already in the Customs!'

Receiving no reply from within, this time he opened the door and impudently poked his head inside. The light was still on. One glance showed him that the cabin was empty, a second that the absent occupant had not even closed his bags or otherwise prepared for landing.

'Well, what the 'ell are you playing at?' he exclaimed. 'And where the 'ell have you got to? Knew something of this sort would happen.' And he began running hither and thither, looking in the saloons and in the smoking-room, searching here, there, and everywhere for the vanished man.

The man with the scar paused to watch his antics for a moment.

'How droll!' he murmured, his lips curling in

an evil smile. 'But we must go.' And, closely followed by his companion, he hurried off in the direction of the gangway.

CHAPTER II

MARR'S NERVES ARE HARDLY EQUAL TO THE KILLING

During the mid-winter months there are seldom to be found more than two or three people with sufficient hardihood to brave the bitter cold of dawn and welcome at Southampton Docks friends arriving by the early-morning boat. On that particular cold, rough, January morning when Grouchy was removed from the packet-steamer in a basket trunk, there was only one person waiting on the quay. He was a thin young man of medium height, rather extravagantly and over-elegantly dressed. A casual glance at his features gave the impression that he was a pleasant, and perhaps cultured, but obviously irresponsible youth; the few dark lines on his pale anæmic face denoted weakness of character and self-indulgence rather than age, for, judging by every other external sign, he could be little over twenty.

Shifting nervously from foot to foot, with a drawn, anxious look on his pale face, he watched the passengers slowly disembark, peering closely at their faces, as one by one they came down the gangway and passed him at its foot. His lips were trembling, as though he were muttering to himself some unending prayer. When the stream of passengers lessened and finally ceased, he be-

came almost distracted. His arms dropped limply to his sides and he stared about him in frightened bewilderment. But just as he seemed to be making up his mind to go away, he caught sight of two more men coming down the gangway. His face brightened when he saw them, and he gazed eagerly at the foremost.

'God! How long you've been!' he whispered, resuming his nervous fidgeting, as the man with the scar stepped onto the quay. Then an idea struck him and his face fell suddenly.

'You've failed!' he said in a horror-struck voice.

The man with the scar smiled.

'Ridiculous!' he murmured as he brushed by. 'It is all going splendidly. I have only the Customs to negotiate now; there will be no hitch there. My work is over. There is yours left; but that's easy. Go to it.'

A half-smothered cry escaped from the young man's lips, and he turned and opened his mouth as if to speak again. But the retreating figures had moved too swiftly for him; they were already too far away to hear anything said in a soft voice. What the young man wished to say could not be shouted from the house-tops.

For a short while he stood trembling where he was, in an attitude of abject uncertainty. It was the sound of a bluff voice hailing him from the top of the gangway that recalled him sharply to the necessities of the situation. It cried:

'You can come aboard, sir, if you are looking for any one. But I think the passengers are all off by now.'

The young man looked up and saw a petty officer standing on deck at the top of the gangway, peering down at him through the half-light.

'I—er—I am searching for—' he began nervously; then pulling himself together, and for no apparent reason changing his wording, he courageously took a whole sentence at a run.

'I came to meet Mr. Grouchy,' he called back. 'He should have arrived by this boat.'

The officer consulted a list which he held in his hand.

'Mr. J. C. G-r-o-u-c-h-y,' he said, spelling out the name. 'I suppose that's him. Thought it was pronounced like "Crouch"; but that's neither here nor there. Cabin number three. Come up, sir, if you like. But I expect he's over at the Customs or the Passport Office by now.'

The young man climbed up the gangway and stepped on board before he replied.

'No, he hasn't landed. I've been waiting at the bottom there ever since the boat arrived.' Then by way of unasked-for explanation he added: 'I am Mr. Hubert Marr, his nephew.'

'I see,' replied the officer somewhat rudely. 'Then you ought to know him when you see him. If you say he hasn't landed, I suppose he's still on board. Come along and I will show you where his cabin is. We'll see what he's doing. About time he was off the boat. It's over on the other side.'

'You're quite certain, I suppose,' Marr asked as they walked across the deck, 'that he travelled on this boat.'

The officer looked at him with some annoyance.

'Quite certain! Didn't you just hear me read out his name on my list and the number of his cabin? Well, if he—' He was cut short by a sailor, who came up at a half-run.

'Cabin number three, sir,' the sailor interjected breathlessly. 'Have you seen him? Can't find him anywhere. And his bags aren't locked yet. He'll be missing the boat-train if he doesn't look out.'

'What's all that about?' asked the officer swinging round.

'The gentleman, sir,' explained the sailor more quietly, 'the gentleman what had number three cabin, sir—don't know his name. I can't find him, and I've 'unted everywhere. He hasn't gone ashore because his luggage is still aboard. He hasn't even begun to put his things together yet; and I'm waiting to carry 'em ashore. Have you seen him, sir?'

'I can't say whether I have or not,' the petty officer observed sagely. 'I don't know what he looks like. Perhaps he is still feeling the effects of the bad crossing. He may be in the—ahem'—he glanced at Marr—'out of sight somewhere. Down below.'

'Big black beard, and he's not in the lavatory,' cried the sailor, becoming excited again as the prospect of a tip for porterage receded further into the distance. His excitement was excusable. He had grown up in the belief that what the petty officer didn't know, no one knew; he therefore quite naturally assumed that as the petty officer didn't know definitely that Grouchy was on board, then Grouchy must have already disembarked.

But the petty officer relieved his anxiety quickly by remarking:

'Well, he must be on the ship somewhere. This gentleman has been waiting for him on the quay and says he has not landed.'

The sailor, distinctly relieved, attached himself to the others in the hope of finding Grouchy more quickly with them than he could by himself. Together, the three men proceeded to Grouchy's cabin.

On reaching the cabin, Marr opened the door and stepped inside. Grouchy certainly was not there. The unclosed bags and Grouchy's book still lying where it had fallen on the floor were the only signs of its late occupant.

As Marr stood looking round the cabin, anxiously wondering what he should say next, the subtle lingering odour of chloroform reached him. Recognising it suddenly, he stuttered, 'Not here—he's not here,' and turned to make a hurried exit before the telltale perfume could be detected by either of the other two.

But the sailor was not to be put off so easily. He had poked his head inside the cabin inquisitively, and was now gazing dismally at the scattered luggage and disordered belongings of the vanished Grouchy.

'A funny smell is about all there is in there,' he observed morosely, as he withdrew his head to allow Marr to pass out.

'Eh, what's that you say?' asked the officer, who was standing outside, looking up and down the deck.

'Funny smell—'

'What the devil can have become of him?' Marr interjected loudly, in a voice quivering with fear, as he stood shaking by the open door.

Both the other men, ignorant of the purpose of the quick interruption, looked at Marr with undisguised surprise at its apparent crudeness. Marr saw his mistake, and hastily attempted to explain:

'I'm anxious,' he said. 'It's not like him to hang about. He knew I was meeting him. What do you think can have happened?'

'Nothing can have happened,' answered the officer, laying absurd stress on the final word. He himself was beginning to think that matters looked rather strange. But he did not communicate his fears to Marr. 'Have another look round the ship,' he ordered the sailor, and turning to Marr said reassuringly: 'Don't you worry; he'll be along in a minute. Nothing can possibly have happened. There was a heavy storm last night, but all the passengers were ordered to keep to their cabins during the crossing; and we see that orders are obeyed. I expect he's feeling ill, and is lying down somewhere. This sort of thing often happens after a bad passage.'

'You don't know him,' Marr replied, forcing a smile. 'My uncle is a difficult man to keep in his cabin. He enjoys it rough. And he won't have been ill. That's the danger, the very thought that makes me anxious. No, he won't be lying down anywhere.'

The officer was impressed. He could not bring himself to believe that anything really serious

could have occurred; but certainly matters were looking uglier every moment. Announcing his intention of finding some more men to aid in the search, he moved away.

'I will wait for your news here,' Marr called after him.

He quietly watched the officer out of sight. But as soon as he was alone, he flung himself on the cabin door and for a few moments swung it feebly to and fro, endeavouring to force a draught through the cabin sufficient to disperse the last suspicion of the clinging odour that had already nearly given him away. Presently he sat down on the couch and wiped away the beads of perspiration which glistened on his forehead, engendered by the sickly fear that was creeping over him. 'Can they be believing any of this?' he wondered as he sat waiting, dreading the reappearance of the sailors with their news.

After a short period of fruitless search, into which several more men had been pressed, the captain of the ship himself, whom the news of the disappearance had just reached, came up to Marr where, with a white, scared face and twitching lips, he was walking aimlessly up and down the deck, outside Grouchy's cabin.

'I'm sorry, Mr. Marr,' he said; 'I cannot understand it. If Mr. Grouchy is not on board somewhere—and he doesn't appear to be—the only possible alternative is that he slipped past you in the dusk. Probably he disembarked early to secure a comfortable seat in the boat-train, intending to come back and take his luggage through the Customs afterwards. In that case, he may be back

any moment. Were you just intending to see him on his way through Southampton or were you travelling with him to London?'

'Travelling with him,' Marr replied faintly.

'Well, I'm afraid he's bound to miss the boat-train now, even if he comes back at once. If you like to go up to the South-Western Hotel and breakfast, I will tell him as soon as he returns where you are, and send him along. You'll both have to travel by a later train.' He spoke briskly, but unconvincingly. And his suggestion that Grouchy might miss the boat-train gave the lie direct to his unconcerned manner. It was not due to go for some time yet. There was lots of time. He knew. And, from his tone, it was obvious that his own ready explanation did not even satisfy himself. He, too, was beginning to doubt whether Grouchy's disappearance was only temporary. But he wanted, at all costs, to be rid of this delicate and hysterical-looking young man. If there was to be bad news—or no news, which would amount to the same thing—he would prefer the tragic message to be delivered by some other official of the company than himself, and at some other place than upon his ship. He did not relish the prospect of participating in a 'scene.'

Marr, even better than the captain, could realise the hopeless inadequacy of the explanation. There was a flaw in it, obvious to him, which was hidden to the captain. Grouchy could not be over at the boat-train securing a seat, for, at Grouchy's own request, he had come to meet him by car. They had arranged to travel back to town by road. But Marr did not call the captain's attention to

this discrepancy. He received the explanation in silence and readily fell in with the suggestion, for he felt himself every moment becoming more and more nervous and less competent to act his part without fear of detection. Already he was filled with terror lest his excessive agitation had raised suspicions. Acute uncertainty possessed him. He could no longer think clearly how he should act appropriately to the part he was playing. The knowledge that a false step, the exhibition of too much distress or too little, might spell his ruin, together with the knowledge of his own hopeless weakness, preyed upon his mind. He snatched at the opportunity of escape afforded him by the captain, and mumbling his thanks, left the boat without further remark.

The captain watched him go. 'Callous young beast!' he thought, angry at Marr's apparent lack of emotion. 'And I was frightened that he was over-highly strung, and would kick up a fuss before I could get rid of him.' He shrugged his shoulders. Callous or not, he was glad to see the last of him.

Marr walked quickly through the docks to the hotel. There, seated at a table in the dining-room, he mumbled an order for some coffee.

'No, nothing!' he replied at length to the waiter, after he had been asked repeatedly whether he would have anything to eat. He didn't want any coffee for the matter of that. He had only come into the dining-room out of a vague sense of obedience to the captain's suggestion, unable to think out anything for himself.

When his coffee came, he sat slowly sipping it,

staring into space before him, his lips twitching nervously in his pallid, expressionless face, his whole body agog with sharp, uneasy movements. Unconscious of the passing time, conscious only of an oppressive sense of the approach of some overwhelming calamity, he sat on and on, a prey to his fears and doubts. But eventually his eyes rested on the clock at the end of the long room. For some time he gazed dully at it, then started, as the length of time he had been sitting there pentrated suddenly to his dazed wits. Nearly nine o'clock! Heavens, he couldn't sit there all day! Again the thought hammered at his mind that to show no concern was as dangerous as to appear false by overstressing natural anxiety. Imagining, in his guilty mind, that by now every one was as aware as he of Grouchy's disappearance and would be construing his actions in the light of that knowledge, he peered furtively round the room to see if any one was noticing his strange behaviour. He caught sight of some waiters standing in a group behind him, smiling and staring curiously at him. One of them had just remarked casually that the young man sitting alone over there, who had been sipping at an empty coffee cup for the last twenty minutes, must be in love. The remark had focussed the smiles and attention of his fellows upon the subject of it. Marr had not heard the poor, soft-spoken jest. He only noticed its effect. He rose, shuddering, and walked quickly from the room, to get away from the observing eyes of those men, feeling that suspicion was already on him.

'God, I must do something,' he thought, help-

lessly. And then remembering the clock, he added, almost aloud: 'Inquiries, inquiries—of course. Over an hour! I should never have left it so long. I must be anxious, distressed. . . . Inquiries. . . . Not too distressed. . . . But just how much? O God!'

He hurried to the door of the hotel and went out. Half across the street, he spun round and came running back into the hotel as though his life depended upon the speed of his reëntry. He had no hat! Without a hat, he reasoned absurdly, he would look impossibly distressed. His mind had already become unable to reckon the values of common acts.

He seized his hat from a peg in the hall and crushed it down onto his head. Then, with a happier expression on his face, he made again for the street.

'Your bill, sir!'

'Your bill, sir!' Some one was hurrying along beside him, holding out a small piece of paper. Marr was vaguely aware of a man's presence and of his words. But they meant nothing to him. He only increased his pace a little to get away.

'Your bill, sir!' They were nearly running now, side by side, out of the main entrance of the hotel.

Suddenly Marr stopped dead. His bill! Of course; he had forgotten. How stupid! There! He pressed a coin into the waiter's hand. Why did that man leer at him? he wondered. What did he know? Marr nearly taxed him with the question, but thought better of it. He stepped

quickly across the street to the office of the Cross-Channel Services Company.

'Have you any news?' he inquired, smiling at an old man, who was busy ferreting amongst a pile of books behind the long desk.

'News?' piped the old man, looking up from his work. 'News of what?'

'Any news of Mr. Grouchy?' Marr answered, smiling again. Damn it! What the devil was he smiling at? He was making an utter fool of himself! Why wouldn't his features react naturally to his studied words?

'Ah, yes,' sighed the old man. 'You've come to inquire about Mr. Grouchy. The agent has been expecting you for some time.'

'For some time,' thought Marr. There was an ominous ring in that! The agent had been expecting him for some time! Of course he had—expecting him for hours. What had made him sit so long in that infernal dining-room? For an hour he had done nothing—and then to smile! They could not believe it—it was impossible.

'Will you come in here and speak to him?' the old man went on, in his squeaky voice; and coming out from behind the barrier, he opened a door at one end of the main office that had a frosted glass in it, marked 'Private.'

'The gentleman inquiring after Mr. Grouchy,' he announced solemnly, as Marr passed through.

The agent rose to receive him.

'Er—good-morning, Mr.—Mr.—'

'Marr. I am Mr. Grouchy's nephew. I came to meet him, you know,' said Marr mechanically.

'Quite, Mr. Marr. Er—sit down, will you?'

The agent was playing for time. He did not quite know how to frame his sentences so as to give as little shock as possible to this frail, effeminate-looking youth. Marr sank inertly into a chair near by.

'You came to inquire after Mr.—after your uncle,' the agent began again. 'Er—yes—we are expecting to hear further any minute now. We—I expect Mr. Grouchy will be along himself almost directly.'

The agent thought his last remark a masterpiece of ingenious and justifiable duplicity. He expected nothing of the kind. But he wanted to get rid of Marr for a few minutes to give himself time to rehearse the few well-chosen and sympathetic phrases, which were not coming as spontaneous as he had hoped. But the effect produced by the agent's ingenuity was far from what he had expected. Marr sprang up from his seat with a cry of dismay, instinctively raising an arm as though to ward off a threatened blow.

'Has he been found?' he cried, alarm ringing clearly in his shaking voice.

But the agent was far too perturbed himself to notice anything incongruous, either in Marr's question or behaviour.

'Don't disturb yourself unduly, sir,' he said hastily. 'He hasn't been found.' Then realising the painful ambiguity of his expression, he struggled ineffectively to smooth it over, saying: 'I should say that we have heard nothing definite at this office yet. But, as I said a moment ago, we are hopeful of hearing something any minute.

If you will wait in the hotel, I will send over immediately I receive a message. And, doubtless, Mr. Grouchy will himself follow the message a few minutes afterwards.' The over-emphasis of the 'doubtless' revealed the hypocrisy of his optimistic words.

The agent was playing the same game that the captain had played earlier in the morning. In his own mind he had no doubt at all that there would be bad news to be delivered eventually. He had known a very similar case to this before and was convinced that if ever Grouchy was seen by mortal eye again, it would only be as a much decayed, perhaps unrecognisable corpse, left stranded and stinking high upon the beach by the retreating tide. But like the captain in his ship, he didn't want a scene, just now and in his office, though he could see no way of avoiding one somewhere in the end, or of having to deliver the bad news himself.

Marr was glad to be out of the office, glad to go anywhere where he need speak to no one for a little while. Foolishly, he was glad to postpone the moment when he would have to receive the tragic announcement of the abandonment of the search, and attempt to show appropriate distress. Such postponement could bring no relief, only accentuate his miserable cowardice. Even now, he could not trust himself. Each time he opened his mouth he trembled lest the whole truth should involuntarily come pouring out; with every evasive word, every uncontrollable movement he feared lest he had irretrievably given himself away. He stumbled blindly back across the road, and sank

into a deep armchair in the hall of the hotel; but, noticing that there were other people about, and distrustful even of those innocent strangers, he quickly moved on again into an empty writing-room to be alone.

In the writing-room he sat down at a table and rested his bursting head upon his hands. This waiting was unendurable! He could never carry this deception to a successful end. Already every one must know the truth; they were merely playing cat-and-mouse with him. They could not possibly believe. What a fool he had been! Nothing could be worth a moment of this torture, this intolerable torment which he would have to endure from now on until the end of time.

'Oh, my God,' he groaned aloud. Then, vaguely conscious of the incongruity of his appeal, he cried out piteously: 'He will not hear.'

Vainly he tried to induce a little confidence by repeating to himself: 'Only a little longer—a little longer. It's all right—it's all right. It will be all right if I can hold out a little longer.' But he knew that this was only the beginning. If it was all well now, he could not maintain his secret forever. Unconsciously he picked up a pen which lay before him on the table and scribbled on the blotting-pad: 'It's all right—it's all right—a little longer.' Over and over again he wrote the words until long lines of writing grew under his hand.

Thus he was found when, some time later, the door of the writing-room opened to admit the agent. The latter approached Marr quietly from

behind and glanced inquisitively over the young man's shoulder to discover what he was so earnestly engaged in writing upon the blotting-pad.

'It's all right—a little longer,' he read, written there a multitude of times.

'I'm terribly afraid, sir,' he began in a slow, compassionate voice and gently shaking his head, 'it is my bitter task to bring bad news. I am afraid you are buoying yourself up with hopes that I must dispel.' He pointed a lean finger at the writing on the blotting-pad.

At the sound of the voice Marr looked up. Then he looked down to discover what the agent's finger was pointing at. He saw before him only lines of his own writing, words which his blurred eyes could not read nor his dazed senses appreciate. How came that writing to be there? he wondered. What did it say? He looked again at the agent's thin finger pointing so ominously down at it. Suddenly the truth burst upon him in all its naked horror. What he had feared must have come to pass already! He had been incriminating himself, unconsciously writing down the truth. Those words he could not read were his own accusation, written by his own hand! With a cry of terror he stretched his hands over the writing, and crouched forward over the desk in a futile effort to cover the damning evidence from view.

The agent looked down at him pityingly.

'Calm yourself,' he said, laying his hand gently on Marr's shoulder.

Marr shuddered and shrunk away from the

touch. But suddenly he sat bolt upright and withdrew his hands from the table. What did it matter now? The agent had read what was there. This was the end. So soon! He laughed absurdly.

The untimely laughter shocked the agent deeply. The young man was becoming unhinged, he feared. The interview was going to be exceedingly trying. He looked round the room anxiously for help, but finding he was alone with the youth, determined before calling for assistance to make one more effort on his own. Moistening his lips, he began again:

'Look at what you have been writing. I am am afraid you have been buoying yourself up with false hopes.' The agent repeated his previous remark. He had been pleased with it when it had come to him, spontaneously, upon the first occasion. For sympathetic phrasing he doubted whether it could be improved. He waited a moment in silence to let the import of his words sink slowly into the distracted mind of the poor young man.

Marr looked down at the fatal blotting-pad again. His eyes and head were clear now. What did anything matter? He had given in. He could not escape his own accusation. There it lay in black and white before him. He read it slowly. 'It's all right—a little longer,' written over and over again. Nothing but that. God, he was going mad! What was there incriminating in that?

'It's all right,' he cried, swinging round and

glaring defiantly at the agent. 'What is there in that?'

'Nothing, nothing; calm yourself,' said the agent soothingly; and he took the opportunity of the succeeding silence to begin his rehearsed speech: 'But I fear things are not all right, Mr. Marr. I deeply regret having to deliver a painful message to you.' He paused a moment.

The quiet, smooth tone of the agent's voice was beginning to have its effect upon Marr's jaded nerves, to restore his numbed senses to activity.

'Then it *is* all right,' he burst in. 'It is—' But recollecting with sudden horror the part he was attempting to play he broke off, and holding himself fiercely in hand, in a combative voice demanded: 'Go on. Tell me the rest. Let me know. What have you come to say?'

The agent noticed nothing peculiar in what Marr had said. He was far too preoccupied in endeavouring to remember how the next sentence of his own speech should run. Interruptions upset him. Ah, yes; he remembered. Gravely shaking his head, he continued:

'I grieve much to have to tell you that we have no news of your uncle. There is not much more to tell. As was feared from the beginning, he is not on the ship—the search that has been made leaves no room for doubt of that. Nor did your uncle, Mr. Grouchy, ever disembark—we know that from the passport office through which, if he had landed, he must inevitably have passed. I fear—the company fears that a terrible tragedy has occurred.' Here he paused for a long time, expecting Marr to break down. But the latter

only stared up at him vacantly. Mystified, but greatly relieved, he went on: 'What happened is this. During the night, at a time when the storm was at its height, Mr. Grouchy was seen out on deck by a sailor who heard him cry out. He was immediately ordered back to his cabin—no passengers were allowed on deck owing to the dangerous violence of the weather. And I understand that this was not the first time that it had been necessary to request Mr. Grouchy to go back to his cabin; he had been out on the deck previously during the voyage. But it was believed, with good reason at the time, that on this second occasion Mr. Grouchy complied with the request to return. Now, unhappily, it would appear either that he did not, or that he came out again later; for in the early hours of this morning when the ship was still some distance out of port no answer could be got from his cabin by a sailor who had arranged to carry his luggage ashore. A steward also noticed his absence at about the same time. And that is not all. He never slept in his bunk at all during the night! It is feared—the company fears—feels almost certain—that a terrible tragedy took place during the night, and desires through me to express its deep sympathy for you.' The agent paused for breath. 'I am indeed sorry to be the harbinger of this sad news and at such a time to have to ask you to look at this—it will be an exceedingly painful sight for you.' He held out a hand which, while delivering himself of his hothouse speech, he had carefully concealed behind him and exhibited a crushed and soaking felt hat.

Marr looked once at the hat, and then buried his face in his hands. The emotions which filled him were too diverse; he dared not look again. A feeling of intense relief struggled within him to master the old oppressive sense of overwhelming menace. Could it be as easy as this? Were they not merely playing with him? Could they suspect nothing?

'Terrible!' he forced himself to say, and then, remembering the hat and realising that something more was expected of him, he added: 'Look at the initials—inside. They were always there.'

'J. C. G.,' said the agent, without so much as glancing at the hat. He knew them only too well. He had sat in his office staring at them for fully twenty minutes while he had been puzzling over the manner in which he should hand on the message that those same initials conveyed. He indicated the hat again with his disengaged hand.

'It was found,' he said, 'by one of the men who were swabbing the decks this morning, caught beneath one of the short ropes which secure the tarpaulin over the aft-hatch.'

Marr did not move or speak.

After waiting some minutes in silence, the agent began again nervously:

'If there is anything I can possibly do, I would of course be—' He stopped just in time before finishing the sentence with the word 'delighted.'

Marr nerved himself for a great effort.

'No, thank you. I am all right,' he said. But hearing himself again use those words of terrible

memories, 'all right,' he hid his face and groaned bitterly.

The agent took Marr at his word. He had performed his distressing duty and was anxious to get away before the young man should have another paroxysm. He justified himself with the thought that others were more competent nurses than himself. He would send a waiter to attend to Marr. He moved slowly towards the door. Turning there, he called back gently:

'The luggage—Mr. Grouchy's luggage—I've had it brought over. It is in the hall.' And without waiting for a reply he closed the door softly behind him.

For some time Marr remained motionless, utterly crushed and overwhelmed. But at last he rose, walked unsteadily across the room, and pressed the bell beside the fireplace. Presently a waiter appeared in answer to the summons.

'Have the car brought round,' Marr ordered in a far-away, dreamy voice. 'And the luggage that was brought over—put that on it.' As the waiter was closing the door behind him, Marr called after him: 'And—and bring me a large brandy.'

As he waited for his drink and the car to be got ready, Marr moved restlessly about the room. Every now and then he turned suddenly to glance apprehensively behind him. And each time when he found he was still alone the strange smile that hovered over his face would break into a little laugh....

CHAPTER III

STONE

GROUCHY's eyelids quivered. Suddenly he opened his eyes. But the bright light blinded him; he blinked and quickly closed them again. Then he was seized with an urgent desire to yawn, but realising just in time that he was feeling violently sick, he suppressed the yawn and kept his mouth tight shut.

'It must have been an awful crossing,' he mused dreamily. It was not like him to feel sick. This was his first experience of that unpleasant sensation. Ah, well, it was bound to come sooner or later. This sickness was the sign of old age and weakness coming to him at last, ruthlessly attacking him in the stomach. Sad! But he had had a long innings. Every one in the end—Ugh! There it was again! The boat was still pitching badly. He wondered what time it was; how far the ship was from her destination. He tried to raise a hand to rub his eyes preparatory to looking at his watch. That was odd; he could move neither hand! And yet he had no pain of cramp. Another new failing? He opened his eyes wide and stared about him in blank astonishment.

'Great Heavens! I am going mad,' he attempted

to ejaculate, only to discover that he could emit no sound from his mouth. Hallucinations now! Now was worse than seasickness!

He looked down with a sorely puzzled expression at his legs and arms. Bound! He tried to open and shut his mouth. But no, he couldn't even do that. Gagged! He appeared to be trussed like a chicken!

As his eyes gradually became accustomed to the dazzling light, he slowly realised that he was not on the couch in his cabin as he had imagined, but was sitting, gagged and bound hand and foot, in a rapidly moving, ill-sprung car. But that was beyond the bounds of possibility. It must be an hallucination. He knew he was in his cabin. Things were coming to a pretty pass when he felt seasick and saw visions on the same day!

Unable, however, to convince himself that either his sight or his senses could have collapsed so suddenly and so completely, he blinked again and raised his eyes for another examination of his surroundings.

The vision was still there; and certainly it looked tangible enough. On the seat in front of him, with his back to the driver, sat a lean man who gazed at him hungrily out of a pair of bloodshot eyes. Grouchy stared back. What eyes! Their lower lids drooped so grotesquely that they afforded no possible support and little enough protection, even when they blinked, to the eyeballs behind. Except for this one strange peculiarity, the face of the man was commonplace; the shabby brown moustache, the high cheek-bones and hollow cheeks, the rough, unhealthy skin and nearly

bald head might have belonged to any ill-nourished city-living clerk instead of a—

'Instead of a—? I wonder what his honourable profession is,' mused Grouchy, far too astonished and intrigued to feel anything but the most intense curiosity.

But tiring at length of his minute examination of that unsavoury-looking creature, Grouchy continued his roving inspection elsewhere. There was one other person in the car, a man seated beside him on his right. This stranger offered a strong contrast to the first. His hair was black and thick, and brushed with the greatest care and immaculate precision. His eyes were bright and clear, and in his left he wore a monocle which accentuated his carefully groomed appearance. His nose and chin were bold and strong. But his coarse lips betrayed the sensualist and looked unhealthily red against his pale anæmic skin. Nevertheless, except for those lips, and one other disfigurement—a red angry scar of semi-circular shape which shone high up over his left temple and ran slightly into his hair—he was a good-looking man.

'Good-looking for a blackmailer, I suppose, or some such type of rogue,' was Grouchy's unspoken judgment. He doubted no longer that neither the two men nor the car nor his own bonds were figments of his imagination. All these things were unpleasantly real.

Presently the man beside him became conscious that Grouchy's eyes were upon him and turned to meet the inquiring gaze.

'Ah! Good-morning, Mr. Grouchy,' he said

with a polite smile and graceful bow. 'So you have awakened at last! And refreshed, I hope. It has indeed afforded me the greatest pleasure to see you sleep so soundly, may I say even luxuriously, under such—believe me, unavoidably—uncomfortable conditions. It is regrettable that the preliminaries of my hospitality should of necessity be so inexcusably fatiguing, but, to be frank, I feared that an invitation of less cogent nature than that which you are now so graciously accepting would have inevitably met with a refusal—a polite refusal, no doubt, but a refusal nevertheless—from a man as busy as yourself.' His smile hardened into a sarcastic sneer as he talked and his eyes sparkled with evil enjoyment.

'Forgive my rudeness—my error of omission,' he went on after a moment's silence, assuming a solemn expression and elegantly waving a hand in the direction of the man opposite. 'Permit me to present my secretary, Mr. Angelo Snobbit.' He leaned over towards Grouchy and whispered confidentially in his ear: 'Not one of *the* Snobbits, of course, but a charming man nevertheless; though at first a trifle shy and uncompanionable. Plebeian—you understand.'

'And this is Mr. John Stone, commonly known as "Silky,"' the man opposite broke in, in a thick coarse voice.

'It is unusual, my dear Angelo,' Stone resumed in a deeply offended tone, 'to become familiar—or "matey," as I fear you would term it—so early in a new acquaintance. I have had occasion to remark before that, in your untutored

mind, you are apt to confuse familiarity with that natural ease and grace common in intercourse between cultured strangers.' He turned again to Grouchy. 'Pray do not notice it, Mr. Grouchy. In these democratic days we suffer so acutely—'

'For Gawd's sake, shut up,' growled Snobbit.

'Incorrigible Angelo!' Stone drawled in reply. 'Heart-rending—you would say "earsplitting"—invocations of the Deity constitute the major portion of your inartistic conversation. They form a bad habit, both ugly and unfruitful. And the frequency with which they fall from your lips speaks more highly for your constancy than for your correct appreciation either of æsthetic or commercial values. You must endeavour to exorcise your pseudo-devout inclinations and conceive of a more decorative mode of discourse. Imagine me descending to the use of such terms as you employ and, even now, instead of reproving you in rich and flavoured prose, twisting my tongue over as crude, colourless, vulgar, and unemphatic an exhortation as, "stop it, Snobbit." But your interruption has caused me to forget our guest.' He turned again to Grouchy and continued his endless monologue. On and on, the mocking sentences poured from him, surveying everything in general and nothing in particular. And with each new thought he cunningly associated Grouchy, slyly mocking him by showing a false consideration for the latter's interests. He spoke of the roughness of the preceding night, and how he had feared at one time that his plans for the entertainment of Grouchy would on that

account have had to be postponed; of the surprising beauty of the day, for which he was grateful, affording him as it did the unqualified delight of showing Grouchy the charming Hampshire countryside at its best; of the political situation, and how he hoped that in view of the threatened confiscatory legislation Grouchy had sent a substantial portion of his wealth abroad; of the widespread outbreak of the foot-and-mouth disease, and how relieved he had been to learn, upon inquiry, that it had not appeared in the district where Grouchy kept his incomparable herd of Guernseys; of the last play by Cyprian Thayne, and with what unmixed pleasure he had watched Grouchy and his nephew—'dear Hubert Marr'—enjoying it so unrestrainedly at the first-night performance a few weeks before, though he himself had considered it a trifle too risky and the author's style a little lacking in significant form. On and on he talked unwearyingly. With Grouchy unable to speak and Snobbit apparently disinclined to venture another interruption, it seemed that, short of an act of God, he must go on for ever.

When Grouchy had recovered from his first astonishment at finding himself in such unexpected circumstances and surrounded by such strange company, he listened for some time with amused amazement to the man Stone's impudent chatter. But presently he fell to wondering how on earth he had arrived in his present awkward situation. Who these men were or what they were it was as useless to conjecture as it was in fact impossible to ask. That he had been kid-

napped successfully and presumably for some nefarious purpose from the channel steamer was a justifiable assumption; and that chloroform had been administered to him he suspected from the sweet lingering odour which greeted his sensitive nostrils. That summed up his present knowledge. In the last suspicion he was vastly relieved to discover an alternative to the ' rough passage and advancing years ' theory to which he had at first attributed the uneasy condition of his stomach. But that was all the comfort he could find. Stone hinted in his discourse that their unnamed destination was a full half-day's motor drive from Southhampton, apologising profusely for his discourtesy in having to ask his guest to wait until tea-time for his breakfast. And in the course of a further attempt to mitigate the inhospitable conduct of which he was constantly accusing himself he also said that his house—or gaol, as Grouchy thought it might more appropriately be called—lay amid some of the loveliest country in England ' where the air was scented by the pine woods and the bittern boomed its solitary note across the fertile valleys—a charming spot, though not, of course, so entrancing as Grouchy's exquisite manor in Somerset.' In the same vein Stone had begged forgiveness for having but one other person in his ' house-party ' with whom Grouchy was at all acquainted. But what sediment of truth there was in all this idle chatter Grouchy neither knew nor cared. None of it was in the least degree helpful or comforting to a man in his predicament. Such knowledge could not set him free.

Nevertheless, his mind was not inactive. From

his seat he was unable to see the country through which they were travelling, as the side-curtains of the car were drawn, evidently to prevent inquisitive passers-by seeing into its interior. And as Grouchy thought it extremely unlikely that he would be able to recognise the landmarks along the road, even if he saw them, he did not crane his neck forward and try to peer out through the front window over Snobbit's shoulder; besides, he did not wish to give his captors the satisfaction of seeing their prisoner appear at all anxious or frightened at finding himself in such suspicious circumstances.

As a matter of fact, he was not in the least frightened. Not scenting any particular danger ahead, he was almost entertained by the novelty of the situation. Leaning back, he closed his eyes and fell to pondering over his position and conjecturing as to the possible motives of his kidnappers. And Stone at last, evidently imagining either that he had gone off to sleep again or at least that he was determined to pay no further attention to him, stopped talking, thus giving Grouchy the opportunity for a little quiet reflection which his constant droning had until then rendered quite impossible.

The conclusion to which Grouchy eventually came confirmed the idea that had occurred to him upon his first examination of his captors: he was the victim of some clever rogues whose sole object was the extraction of a sum of money in return for his liberty, modern bandits who would hold his person to ransom. He doubted whether they were more dangerous than that. Unfor-

tunately for him, he suffered from those illusions as to the sanctity of his person which are common to all rich men, and could not bring himself to believe, despite their unpleasant looks, that these men were likely to risk inflicting upon him any serious injury.

Feeling, therefore, little fear, Grouchy quite relished the prospect of the duel of wits which he would have. The prospective struggle bade fair to afford him really exhilarating adventure, such as he had many times craved for but never, except perhaps once or twice on board his small yacht, experienced. He felt no qualms as to the result of such a contest. He was confident that he would speedily find a way to extricate himself from his imprisonment. He had yet to find the man who was his master, he solemnly assured himself, and these men did not look like supplying that deficiency. But he gave them the credit for being no common thieves or tricksters. How they had managed to steal him from his cabin and spirit him off the channel steamer he could not guess. But the very fact that they had carried out the coup successfully spoke volumes for their ingenuity and resource. Worthy opponents they would be for him, he flattered himself. They had won the first trick easily, but that had been played at a time when he had not expected the attack. Now he was ready for them, on his guard. In future their paths would be strewn with difficulties; they would find him less easy to keep than to capture. He would show them a trick or two....

Grouchy's easy confidence was, perhaps, in no

small degree due to the fact that he remembered that his nephew was to have met him on arrival at Southampton. Therefore, he argued, his disappearance would have been discovered at once. By now, Hubert would have given the alarm; at this very moment many people would be searching for him; and all England would soon be ringing with the startling news of his disappearance. At the very most, his captors could have no more than a few hours' start before the chase began in earnest. Grouchy felt almost grateful to Stone and Snobbit for their entertainment. Adventure with security! What a tale he would have to tell when he returned!

But had he been able to see his nephew at this precise moment his complacency would have suffered a rude shock, and he would have nerved himself for a more serious struggle than he yet anticipated, a struggle perhaps more desperate than even his craving for adventure and excitement would readily have welcomed.

Marr had just arrived in London. The car which bore him had passed over Westminster Bridge and was now halted in a traffic block outside the Houses of Parliament. On the far side of the road, outside the Underground Station, the newsvendors were already selling the home editions of the evening papers.

Marr was plunged in a state of acute depression; the nervous excitement of the morning had told on him severely. He sat limply and inertly in the car asking himself whether it was possible that all those people at Southampton had been deceived; whether he had really escaped, how-

ever narrowly, the condemnation of his own glaring insincerity. How bitterly now he hated Stone, who had put the vile plot into his head, offering such an enticing bait! But it was too late to turn back; he would have to go through with it to the end. He shuddered as, gazing out of the window across the road, he caught sight of a poster which read:

'Great gale in Channel.'

He hastily averted his eyes to the near side of the road. Yes, he would have to go through with it. He would never be able to get away from it again. . . .

A boy came running along the gutter towards the car, shouting something which Marr could not hear. But there was a poster fluttering about his legs upon which could be clearly seen the two words, 'Channel Tragedy,' written in the heaviest type.

Marr read them, started, then, with a sudden access of agility, leaped out of the car. He seized the newsboy as he sped by and bought a paper. Standing on the pavement he glanced over the headlines on the front page. Ah! Here it was; the news had reached London already.

'Well-known business man drowned.'

Lower down the page a small article began:

'Mr. J. C. Grouchy, the well-known financier and intrepid amateur yachtsman who was travelling on the night boat from Havre to Southampton, due to arrive at the latter place early this morning—'

That was enough. Marr stepped dizzily back into the car and sank into the deeply cushioned

seat. A sickly smile spread over his face as he murmured:

'Drowned! They've swallowed it. Drowned before the whole world and nothing suspected. . . .'

The plot had succeeded. He was safe for a while. But suddenly the smile faded from his face and his whole body shook as though touched by an icy draught in the hot atmosphere of the closed car. He muttered:

'Nothing suspected—yet. But I shall have to go on living this lie. I can't do it. Sooner or later I shall tell. I shall cry it out in my sleep. I can't hold it for ever.' A little cry of terror escaped him and he swept a hand across his glistening brow.

A policeman somewhere ahead lowered his hand and the thick column of traffic pressed on. . . .

CHAPTER IV

THE CREATION OF HENRY BIRKETT

LATE in the afternoon the car which carried Grouchy and his captors turned out of the main road into a short carriage-drive, drawing up at length in front of an ugly Victorian stone house, set back a few hundred yards from the road, in the middle of a clump of pines. As soon as it had stopped, the cords which bound Grouchy's legs were removed and he was made to walk straight into the house, guarded by Stone and Snobbit, one on either side.

'Welcome to our simple home,' said Stone affably with his inevitable smile, as soon as they were safely inside. 'We lead a quiet but pleasant existence here. But after so long and arduous a journey you will no doubt desire to be taken straight to your apartment. I will postpone, for the moment, your introduction to my small domain, and show you to your room at once. Some refreshments shall be sent up to you there immediately. Rest as long as you feel inclined. While you are here, treat this house as your own. Please do not stand upon ceremony and hasten to rejoin your host; we will have ample opportunity to talk later when you are refreshed. I will be

patient. But I confess I am yearning to hear all your news, especially your reports of the latest frivolities from my beloved Paris.'

While Stone chattered, Grouchy was hustled across the small bare hall and up two flights of narrow, naked stairs. On the second landing the party halted. There Stone turned the key and shot back a couple of bolts outside a door to the right, threw it open, and unceremoniously pushed Grouchy through the open doorway.

The attic room in which Grouchy found himself was a large one. But it was dingy and dark, ill-fed with light by one small dormer window which itself was heavily barred and further darkened by a thick branch of pine that brushed against it on the outside. And judging from the musty smell that hung in the atmosphere of that apartment, even that one small window had not been opened for long ages. Two beds in opposite corners of the room, two chairs, and a bare deal table constituted the whole furniture of that unpleasing interior.

'Before I leave you,' said Stone, 'in case I am mistaken and you have not met each other on some previous occasion, allow me to introduce to you your fellow-guest, Mr. Henry Birkett.' He waved a hand in the direction of the more distant bed.

Grouchy turned in the direction indicated and now noticed something that had escaped him on his first cursory glance round the room. Stretched full-length, with his face to the wall, on the bed in the darkest corner of the room, lay a small man; the form of his body could be dimly

seen against the lighter background of the bedclothes beneath him. Stone gave Grouchy a push.

'Be friendly,' he whispered. 'Go and talk to him. I like my guests to agree.' And chuckling to themselves, he and Snobbit turned and left the room. Grouchy could hear them, still whispering and chuckling together, as they shot the bolts outside.

The man lying on the bed had evidently been fast asleep, for he turned over slowly at the sound of the door being closed, rubbed his eyes, and looked around dreamily to see what was happening. He was an old man, dirty, shabby, and unkempt, with a scrubby, matted beard. He looked ill, too, and weary. But when his gaze fell upon Grouchy, who, with his arms still bound and his mouth gagged, was standing like a ghost beside him, his eyes brightened a little, and he sat up as quickly as his feeble body would allow. He looked at Grouchy closely.

'Who are you?' he asked at length, in a gentle voice strangely out of keeping with his uncouth appearance. 'Another poor creature fallen into this devil's hands, I suppose! Or are you' —his tone hardened perceptibly—'or are you another of the beast's jokes?'

Grouchy grunted and wagged his head from side to side to indicate his willingness but inability to reply. And presently the old man, appreciating that Grouchy was securely gagged, dragged himself off the bed and stumbled forward to release him.

'Ah! That's better. Thank you,' said

Grouchy cheerily, when the last coil of the cords and bandages had been removed, and he could stretch his aching limbs and work his jaw to rid himself of the painful numbness that had set in. 'Thank you. That's a great relief. Thank you, Mr. Birkett.' He smiled gratefully at the dirty old man.

But Grouchy's well-intentioned remark produced an angry glare from the old man and a hot reply.

'Exactly! I thought so,' he rapped out. 'Very witty. Just what I expected. I am deceived into thinking you another wretched man trapped like myself; I take off your bandages; and then—then I hear you say that. What humour! Doesn't it begin to pall yet? Go back to your Silky and tell him how well his joke went. Devil!'

A gruff shout of laughter, coming from outside the door and sounding as though it emanated from Snobbit's coarse mouth, greeted this sally. The old man rushed furiously back to his bed, flung himself upon it, and turned his face again to the wall.

Grouchy gazed after him in blank astonishment. What he had done to merit this abuse he could not imagine. The old man was mad! He shrugged his shoulders and turned away. But after a moment he determined to try again. Stepping up to the old man's bedside, he touched him gently on the shoulder and began:

'Mr. Birkett, Mr. Birkett—'

'Haven't you done enough?' cried the old man bitterly. 'Aren't you satiated with your

devilry? Must you make sport of me all the time?'

Another burst of coarse laughter floated in from outside. The old man buried his face in the pillow in anguish.

Grouchy was at a loss. To be imprisoned was bad enough, but to be imprisoned with an idiot, however harmless, and laughed at by Stone and his men was infinitely worse. He turned away disgusted and walked over to the other bed. There he sat down, wondering what to make of it all.

'Go on, old Birkett! Show your mettle!' cried Snobbit's thick voice distinctly from the far side of the door. The old man writhed on his bed in impotent fury, but did not speak again. After a few minutes' silence, Grouchy heard the men outside, evidently wearying of their sport, but still laughing, go clattering down the uncarpeted stairs.

After a little reflection, Grouchy determined to make one last attempt to pacify the old man's anger and get him, if he could, to talk rationally for a little while. He was not sanguine of being able to induce much reason into those obviously jaded wits, but the old man was his only possible source of information. It was worth another try....

'My name is Grouchy,' he began simply, and speaking deliberately so that the meaning of each word might sink slowly into the old man's mind. 'If I have offended you, I did so unintentionally. Forgive me. I have been brought here by this fellow they call Stone for some purpose unknown

to me. Perhaps you can help me? Do you know who this Stone is or what he can want with me?'

The old man rolled over slowly on his bed and looked at Grouchy steadily. This was more promising, Grouchy thought. He continued slowly:

'Last night I was crossing the Channel from France to England. I—' But the old man interjected a question, in a voice that sounded perfectly reasonable.

'Who did you say you were?' he asked.

'Grouchy. G-r-o-u-c-h-y.'

The old man appeared to be turning the name over in his mind. Grouchy waited.

'What are your other names?' the old man asked presently.

'John Cormack. John Cormack Grouchy is my full name.'

'John Cormack Grouchy . . . Cormack Grouchy,' the old man mused aloud, lingering over the names. 'A strange combination. I wonder.... But my memory is nearly gone. Small wonder! ... Cormack Grouchy.... I must be wrong. But anything seems possible nowadays.... It was very like.' He sounded as though he were were going off the rails again. Grouchy began to despair. But suddenly the old man beckoned him to come closer. Reluctantly, Grouchy went over and sat down beside him at the foot of his bed.

'They listen always,' the old man explained in a quiet voice and pointing to the door. 'Some one is always outside there on watch. They listen and they laugh.' He shuddered. 'Cormack

Grouchy . . . I used to know of a Cormack Grouchy once. I even did some business with him, I believe. But that was long ago. I never met him; no, I am sure of that. But the name, one could hardly mistake that. I wonder . . .'

Grouchy also wondered what would come next from the ragged old man. What he had already said was not very helpful nor did it sound very sane; but the anger had passed away for the moment, and Grouchy let him wander in the hope of hearing something more intelligible presently.

'My name is Vane,' said the old man suddenly, and looked up at Grouchy wistfully.

'I beg your pardon, then,' Grouchy replied. 'I understood it to be "Birkett."'

'I tell you it is Vane.' There was a suggestion of anger again in the old man's voice. Grouchy waited in silence.

'Meyrick Vane,' the old man said presently. 'Does that convey anything to you? Can you remember ever hearing of a man called Meyrick Vane before?'

'Meyrick Vane? Why, yes, I knew of one man of that name. Poor chap!'

'Poor chap! Poor chap, indeed!' the old man cried. 'You are right. I am Meyrick Vane.'

Grouchy looked at the disreputable old creature with a feeling of acute disgust. The man was mad right enough. A common form of madness; thought he was some one else. Meyrick Vane! The only Meyrick Vane that Grouchy had ever known, and his had been a fairly well-known name in business circles, had been dead for months.

Grouchy could even remember the details of his death. It had caused a mild sensation at the time by reason of its gruesome character. But it was no use upsetting the old man's crazy mind by telling him directly that he lied. Better to humour him. Keep him talking in the faint hope of extracting some useful information.

'So you are Meyrick Vane,' said Grouchy coldly. 'I have heard of you before. But tell me how you came here.'

The old man did not notice the acid tone of Grouchy's voice, and went on more contentedly.

'Yes, I am Meyrick Vane,' he said; 'or I was until they brought me here. Then I became Birkett—Henry Birkett. That is many months ago now. It was spring when I was caught, and now ... look at me! Who would believe? Probably you don't yet. But it is true. You will learn more surprising things than that before—' The old man broke off suddenly and turned his face again to the wall at the sound of heavy footsteps coming up the stairs. 'Later—when they are gone,' he murmured.

The door was flung open and Stone entered, followed by another man, whom Grouchy had not seen before, bearing a tray.

'Charming, charming!' exclaimed Stone, and smiled delightedly when, on entering, he found his two prisoners so close together. 'I feared at first that you and Birkett were not going to agree. I am happy to see you now in such friendly proximity. Birkett is quite the wittiest raconteur it has ever been my good fortune to meet. You cannot fail, my dear Grouchy, to

appreciate him in the end. His little anecdote about Meyrick Vane, for instance — it is irresistible. He will recite it for your benefit, no doubt.'

The old man writhed uneasily on his bed. Stone tapped his forehead, shrugged his shoulders, and pointed to the recumbent figure, with the obvious intention of indicating to Grouchy that Birkett was quite mad but harmless.

'But to come to matters of more immediate importance,' he resumed. 'I must apologise. On my return to-day, I was horrified to discover that during my absence my chef had left. I shall, my dear Grouchy, have to crave your indulgence and ask you to abstain from criticising the fare too severely until I have had time to replace him. One of the kitchen maids has done her best to fill the gap in my establishment; but she is sadly inexperienced.' With a deprecating gesture, he indicated a bowl of porridge and a tin mug of steaming tea which had been placed on the table. 'Be generous in your thoughts, my dear Grouchy, and sparing with your condemnation.'

But Grouchy was paying no attention either to the food or Stone's interminable chatter. He was engaged in calculating the chances of success if he were to make a sudden dash for the open door and liberty. There was Stone in front of him; behind Stone the man who had brought in the tray; a third man, probably Snobbit, could be heard walking up and down outside the door; and there were others, no doubt, downstairs. Grouchy came to the conclusion that it was not worth risking. He would be able to think out

something a little more ingenious during the next few hours. There was no hurry. A crude and unsuccessful attempt to force a passage now would only make Stone take greater precautionary measures in the future, rendering a later attempt far more difficult and dangerous.

While Grouchy was still absorbed in such calculations, Stone and his henchmen withdrew. The scraping of the bolts and lock told the two prisoners that they were securely caged once more.

'You heard the devil,' cried the old man, rolling over and beginning to talk again; 'that's what he's always like. Always mocking and smiling. And sometimes he laughs—rarely. But when he does, God help you. Laughter is the danger-signal with him. When that comes, you know he's either executing or planning his most fiendish work. I have heard it once.' His old limbs shivered. 'But I will tell you more about that later. Eat your food now; you will get little enough of it.'

Grouchy walked over to the table and looked at the meal which had been provided. A dish of ill-cooked porridge and a tin mug of nearly black tea! His stomach revolted at the sight of the wretched food. He sipped a little tea, but left the rest and returned to the bedside of the old man.

'I'm not hungry,' he said.

'I felt like that at first,' replied the old man; 'but you'll soon get over that.'

'Never mind. Go on with your story now. Tell me how you came here.' He was not

anxious to hear any more of the old man's nonsensical tale; but he had better let him tell it, he thought. It would console the miserable old creature, and perhaps during the telling of it he might pick up some stray pieces of information concerning the methods and intentions of Stone, which would prove useful when he came to form a plan of escape.

'I will tell you from the beginning,' Birkett began. 'It's not long. That morning I had had a row—we had many—with my step-daughter Violet. She wanted to marry a man called Thomas Langton. I was strongly opposed to the match; I thought then, and still think, the man a bounder. Well, after the row, I went for a walk in the woods to calm down, and incidentally to try and think out a means of putting a stop to the proposed engagement. While I was walking through the woods, I was suddenly set on by Stone and his confederates, stripped of my clothes, dressed in these rags, and brought here. And here I have been ever since. That was in the early spring.' Grouchy could not resist the mental comment that the old man seemed curiously well acquainted with the details of the private life of the personality he had assumed. He remembered that Violet Brand, step-daughter of the late Meyrick Vane, had, in fact, married a man of the name of Langton. The circumstance that she had done so within three months of the tragic death of her step-father, with whom she had lived, and whose sole heiress she had proved to be, had disgusted him at the time, stamping the incident deeply upon his memory. And then a sudden

question arose in his mind, which startled him and made him listen to the old man more attentively. Except on the assumption that the old man was, in fact, as he claimed to be, Meyrick Vane, how could he know these things? How could he know, for instance, the name of Thomas Langton? The engagement of Violet Brand had never been publicly announced; the marriage even had been kept secret for some months after it had taken place, and that had not been till midsummer. Yet the old man had stated that he had been a prisoner since the spring, about the same time that Meyrick Vane was killed, and months before any of these facts had become public knowledge. Was it possible that Birkett was speaking the truth? . . .

'I escaped from here once by a trick,' the old man was saying; 'but only for a few hours. That was about a month ago. I managed to get as far as a little village, a few miles, and made straight for the village police-station. I told the young policeman I found there who I was and where I had come from. He seemed to have been on the look-out for me; knew all about me; agreed with all I said. He kept me there until the sergeant arrived, and then they brought me back here.' Grouchy could not suppress a smile. This was too absurd. No, the old man was clearly mad; there could no longer be any doubt of that.

'You laugh at me,' Birkett went on, noticing Grouchy's smile, but speaking without resentment. 'You think I'm out of my mind, I expect. I am not. But that's just it, who would believe that I am sane when they have heard my story? You

have been taken in exactly as the police were. I bear you no ill-will for that. It is so obvious a conclusion that you could hardly avoid coming to it. But you will believe me in time when you know more. I will go on. It was all quite simple. Stone discovered almost immediately that I was missing. He at once notified the police round the neighbourhood, saying that a man named Birkett, an old labourer and a lunatic, who harboured the delusion that he was called Meyrick Vane, had escaped from here—Stone calls this place a private asylum, and seems to have got the necessary certificates from somewhere. The police took it all in—naturally, just as you have done. I didn't look like the Vane every one must be searching for. They brought me back to this prison. I merely played into Stone's hands by going to the police and telling them who I really was. That was the quickest way he could recapture me. I was a fool. But I didn't quite realise then what I looked like. I do now. The police never doubted for a moment that I was mad. Stone himself told me all this afterwards—how he had fooled the police. He thought it was the best joke he had ever heard, and shrieked with laughter.' The old man shuddered at the memory. 'No, no one would readily believe that I am Meyrick Vane. Stone is a thorough workman. The first time I ever heard him laugh was when he told me what he would turn me into. That was when I was brought here last spring. He described to me then just such a person as you see before you now. He has been true to his word. I have had to grow a beard because I have had nothing to shave with;

I am dirty because I have been given no water to wash in; my skin is cracked and dry—my nails are long, dirty, torn. " I will transform you into an old nondescript labourer. I will rechristen you and endow you with a new identity. I will create a new human being—Henry Birkett, a dirty, disreputable old labourer." Those were practically his very words.' The old man rolled back his sleeve. On one arm Grouchy saw the names Henry Birkett and Anne, rudely tattoed within the circumscribing outline of a heart, and on the other, covering the flesh right up to the elbow, all manner of roughly drawn animals and crude designs. ' There! It's all part of their devilry. They turned me into disreputable old Henry Birkett. Why, I don't know. But they have been thorough. They've duped the police and they've duped you with my new identity. And they mock me with it unceasingly. Henry Birkett they call me to my face, as though Meyrick Vane were already dead. When you first arrived, and unwittingly called me by that name, I thought you were just another of Stone's men come to mock. But I suppose they just told you that Birkett was my name and you suspected nothing. I must have appeared to you to have behaved strangely at first. But I have learned to expect fresh devilries every day.' The old man broke off, sighing hopelessly.

Grouchy was sorely puzzled. Fantastic as the disjointed tale was, it rang true. Slowly Grouchy became convinced that the old man beside him was none other than Meyrick Vane, the Meyrick Vane whom the outside world believed to be dead. A

swarm of questions at once arose in his mind, but he asked only two.

'Have you ever been to India?'

'Long ago. Fifteen years, about.'

'While you were there, did you ever get mixed up in a native riot and receive a knife-wound in the thigh?'

The question was of such little apparent relevance that Vane not unreasonably looked at Grouchy with considerable surprise.

'No,' he answered. 'But I don't understand. Why do you ask?'

But Grouchy had no intention of allowing the conversation to develop along the lines opened up by his question. He mumbled something about making sure in his own mind which Vane he was addressing, and changed the subject hastily.

'What is Stone's game?' he asked. 'Have you offered him money in return for liberty?'

'Many times. They never asked for it. But at first I suspected that that was their real object. I know better now. I offered them large sums, but they always laughed at me, and replied by asking another question: "When did the pauper Birkett come into a fortune?" No, it's no use; a ransom is not what they're after. What they do want I have no idea, and I have tried every device I can think of in fruitless attempts to discover. One thing only have I come firmly to believe, and that is that there is death waiting at the end of the road I am being forced to tread. For why should they hold me here alive, if they want no money, only for some reason want me out of the way? It's death, unless rescue comes

first. Tell me—you will know all the news of the outside world to-day—is the search for me still going on?'

Search! How could a search be going on? There never had been a search. Vane was believed to be dead! The thought struck Grouchy with sudden fear. How hopelessly lost the old man was. But he answered:

'Yes. But I don't think they are on the right track yet.' No purpose could be served by distressing the old man at present with the truth.

'They'll have to be quick,' murmured the old man dismally. 'And Violet, she's not married, is she?—not to that Thomas Langton? I wouldn't be surprised if he were to turn out to be the man at the bottom of all this. He knew what I thought of him; he knew I stood in his way. He might have paid Stone to keep me here out of the way.'

'No, she's not married,' said Grouchy, lying again.

'Thank God for that, anyway,' Vane replied.

And then the old man, who had been cut off from the world for so many months, began to deluge Grouchy with questions until the latter had to plead weariness and exhaustion to gain a brief respite. Grouchy crossed the room and lay down on the other bed. But he had no intention of sleeping; he had never felt more wide awake in his life. He had found a knotty problem, and wanted time to solve it before he answered any more of Vane's teeming questions, and perhaps said things which he might afterwards regret.

The problem which perplexed Grouchy was this: Until half an hour ago he, like every one else, had believed, and with good reason, that Meyrick Vane was dead. He could recall clearly all the circumstances of that unpleasant tragedy which had occurred in the spring of the preceding year. The body of Meyrick Vane had been found, less than a mile away from his home in Wiltshire, on the railway-line, close to the mouth of a tunnel some hundred yards or more in length. More than one train must have done its work on that battered corpse. The head had suffered worst; it had been crushed and mangled beyond all hope of recognition. At the inquest, the work of identification had had to proceed without recourse to the features of the dead man. Some of the limbs, too, had been broken, but sufficient of them remained to identify the whole body as being that of the missing Meyrick Vane. Violet Brand, the dead man's stepdaughter, had performed the dreadful task of identification. The clothes, the personal effects, were those of her stepfather, and—what was final—she declared that the deep scar on the left thigh of the dead man was identical with one her stepfather had received many years before in a riot while they had been in India. Then, with many sobs, she had told the coroner's jury about the violent quarrel she had had with her stepfather on the morning of the day upon which he went out for the walk from which he never returned. And, without giving names, she had hinted at the private nature of the altercation. Throughout, her testimony had been received without question. Who, indeed, could either

question it or desire anything more conclusive? Who knew the dead man as intimately as she, the only child and motherless, who lived with him and kept house for him? A verdict of suicide had been avoided, as there was nothing beyond the dead man's admitted distress subsequent to that particular quarrel to suggest sufficient motive. Moreover, it had been proved that the dead man had been in the habit of occasionally walking through the tunnel on that little-used line where his body had been found, as a short cut from one part to another of his property, avoiding an arduous ascent and descent through the wooded slopes above. During such a risky passage, the dead man evidently had been caught by a passing train. He had been swept along by it, and perhaps by succeeding trains, it was assumed, until finally ejected a terribly broken corpse at the tunnel's mouth. A verdict of ' Accidental death ' had been returned.

But if Grouchy was now to believe the old man's tale, and if he, the real Meyrick Vane, had never received a wound on the thigh, what was the truth that lay behind that inquest and verdict of ' Death by misadventure '? Matters assumed a grave aspect. In the first place, a body sufficiently resembling that of Meyrick Vane as regards height and build must have been secured by Stone and his friends and, after being dressed in Vane's clothes, have been placed on the railway-line, and perhaps replaced there time and time again after each passing train had tossed and broken it in the tunnel and finally swept it to one side, a featurless corpse, at the tunnel's mouth. That was

possible. Grouchy shuddered at the thought of the revolting mutilation the crime had necessitated. But that was not the worst. Mutilation by itself could only have made the success of such an outrageous imposture just within the bounds of possibility. To ensure its absolute success, the person upon whom the task of identification would fall would have had to have been a party to the crime. In this case, that person had been Violet Brand. If the old man spoke the truth, then Violet Brand was guilty of complicity. She had identified a scar on the counterfeit body which she knew had never existed on the body of her stepfather. Here, then, was Grouchy's problem. Was he to believe the old man or Violet Brand? He reminded himself of Violet Brand's marriage within a few months of the tragedy. That was undoubted fact, and it weighed heavily against her. The action belied the acute distress she had displayed at the inquest. Grouchy decided in favour of the old man.

And he did not shrink from the implications his full acceptance of the story entailed. He fully realised that by such acceptance he was accusing Violet Brand of complicity in a revolting crime. In fact, assuming that she was guilty, it looked as though she must have been the moving spirit in the whole affair, had got Stone to remove her stepfather in order to clear her path to a husband and a fortune. Grouchy was nauseated with disgust at the thought of such incomparable villainy. But he determined to divulge nothing of the sordid story to the poor old man. What would be the use of it? He would let old Vane console himself,

as far as he could, with his false belief in Violet Brand's distracted and unwearying search for him. Why should he be robbed of his last and most cherished illusion, and of all hope?

Sordid though it was, Grouchy was at first delighted at having found so easily a satisfactory answer to his problem, even though it opened his eyes to the fact that he himself had fallen into the hands of far more dangerous men than he had at first supposed. He knew better now the nature of the struggle for which to prepare himself. There would be no half-measures. He was up against men who would stop at nothing, men who left nothing to chance. Look at the plight of old Vane! Stone had done his work well. Vane had no idea how hopeless his position was, relying solely upon the false hopes of external aid. Grouchy started violently when he suddenly remembered Vane's question about the search for him, recalling how, on his way to this prison, he himself had been comforted by the thought that, at most, Stone and his accomplices could have only a short start of the search which, he had then assumed, would immediately be made for him. But suppose that now, like Vane, he too was dead in the eyes of the world, that there would be no police search. But no; that was ridiculous. His was no parallel case to Vane's. His nephew had been meeting him at Southampton. His nephew, practically his adopted son, who had lived with him ever since the death of his parents many years ago; his nephew, upon whom he had lavished every care and luxury—too much luxury, impertinent friends had whispered; the boy would be ruined.

... Grouchy smiled at the memory. Hubert would have instigated a search at once.... Then a crushing thought beset him. A voice which could not be silenced whispered within him: 'Suppose your case and Vane's are in truth alike! Violet Brand stood in a like relation to Meyrick Vane as Hubert stands to yourself. This is no coincidence. Like cases are being treated in a similar way, that is all. Both are heirs of wealth. Suppose, like Violet Brand, Hubert Marr is guilty! Stone may ply the trade of subtle remover of unwanted persons! Perhaps those warnings were needed and Hubert has been ruined. You supplied him with money, the monthly cheque. Yes; but that was all. You did not make a friend of him. He has learned only to be extravagant, thoughtless, foolish, weak. You were warned that he gambles, drinks. You knew. You only closed your eyes. You made him what he is. It is too late to alter him now, too late for regrets. ... He is your heir. You have been cleared away. The story is like that of Violet Brand.... And suppose, like her, he identifies another you! ... There will be no search for you. See him at your mock funeral! See his grief! Who is to question it?'

'No, no, impossible,' cried Grouchy aloud, in agony of spirit. 'I will not believe it.'

'You will not, but you do,' whispered the voice.

'What is that?' asked Vane, sitting up and staring at Grouchy in astonishment.

Grouchy remained silent for a moment, then he replied: 'Nothing; an evil dream, that is all.'

But the voice within him laughed him to scorn.

CHAPTER V

GROUCHY IS SHAVED

STONE beamed down at Grouchy.

'It will be an immense improvement,' he declared; 'a trifle less distinguished, perhaps, but infinitely more in keeping with the prevailing mode.'

Grouchy looked up angrily from the chair in which he was bound. But he stifled the furiously indignant reply that rose to his lips. Of what use could it be?

At the moment he was being compulsorily shaved by Snobbit under Stone's surveillance. His moustache had already gone, so had the right half of his beard; the remainder was rapidly disappearing before the sweeping blade. Grouchy was mad with rage under this monstrous indignity; he had been fond of his thick black whiskers; they had suited him well, given him a bold and comparatively youthful appearance. When Stone, accompanied by Snobbit and another man, had entered the room that morning—the morning following Grouchy's arrival at this place of imprisonment—and had announced his project in the sweetest terms, Grouchy had offered resistance. Old Vane pluckily had joined in the revolt; but the poor old man was far too weak to be of any material assist-

ance. He had been savagely thrown into a corner of the room. There he lay now, sadly bruised and shaken, groaning. After that, Stone and his henchmen had made short work of Grouchy, and in no time had him securely bound in a chair. It had been hopeless for him to struggle further, and not a little dangerous now, with the razor which Snobbit was deftly wielding running up and down his chin and throat.

'Why all this elaborate farce?' he burst out during the second lathering, unable to contain himself longer.

'Farce!—my dear Grouchy,' Stone replied, in a tone of horror. 'Your question cuts me like a knife. Farce—what ingratitude! Why, the estimable Angelo has shaved noble chins before to-day. The art of the barber is the one accomplishment at which he has attained surpassing excellence. At one time, and not so very long ago, there was no man more sought after than he, and none more intimate with the domestic privacies of the highest families in the land. He knew which princes were bankrupt, which duchesses unfaithful. He was a veritable mine of valuable information—'

'Valuable to a blackmailer,' interjected Grouchy furiously.

'What perspicacity! That exactly was the trouble,' Stone proceeded suavely. 'He foolishly rejected topiary work on the head for which his natural talents suited him and plunged into the less artistic profession which you name. At the latter he was not an unqualified success—were you, Angelo?'

'Damn you!' cursed Snobbit under his breath.

Stone went on unmoved: ' But age has brought wisdom with it. Now, as my secretary, he is content to work honestly for less but more certain remuneration. This is the first time since he has been in my employ that he has had the opportunity of displaying his inspired skill at his old craft. He could not very well practice upon Birkett because we came to the conclusion that Birkett's appearance would be improved by his being a trifle more hirsute. I think you will agree, my dear Grouchy, that we were right. Look at him! The change during the nine months he has been with us has been so remarkable that his best friends would hardly recognise him now; a stranger would merely laugh at his impudence if he sought to establish his old identity. Indeed, a short while ago, in one of his childish pranks, he ran off to a neighbouring village and there imposed successfully upon a couple of astute policemen. But doubtless he has already proudly related that narrative to you himself—I will not weary you with its repetition. But unlike Birkett, after the most careful deliberation, we have decided that your appearance, my dear Grouchy, would be vastly improved by your being clean-shaven. And in coming to this decision we had regard not only for your looks but also for your mental comfort. Just think how extremely noticeable your thick raven whiskers used to be; they earmarked you. Without them, you will be by no means so readily recognisable at a fleeting glance. Think what that means! You will be able to avoid those casual acquaintances for whom you do not greatly care, whilst still retaining the acknowledgment of more

intimate friends who, like ourselves, will continue to know you in spite of your disguise. What an enviable position to be in! In complaining, you do us grave injustice. You might perhaps gracefully and with some truth have argued that so negligible a result is scarcely worth the labour on our part necessary for its achievement. But even there, with great respect, I would differ from you. Our exertions are both entertaining and worth while; one never can tell how valuable the change in you might prove. To appreciate the possibilities and benefits of such a transformation at their full value, recall the delightful story of Birkett and the policemen to your mind. Even failing the recurrence of such a happy incident as that, at the very least, such alteration of your facial characteristics, should you, too, suddenly feel inclined to leave us, would give us a breathing space for thought and, maybe, even for a short journey while you were making the necessary explanations and their accuracy was being verified. You see—'

'For Heaven's sake stop your nonsensical chatter,' Grouchy burst in. 'You won't cut any ice that way. Come to business, man, and talk sense. What is your final purpose?'

Stone assumed a horrified expression and was about to reply when Grouchy again went on:

'No, listen to me a moment. Vane has been here already about nine months. How much longer is he to be kept prisoner? How long am I to be held? What is the end of it all? Look here, let's come to grips with the matter. What are you after? What are your terms—how much?'

Stone smiled blandly, but did not speak.

'Come, state your figure,' Grouchy demanded aggressively.

Stone's smile gave place to a look of sympathy. 'You are suffering, I fear, my dear Grouchy,' he said smoothly, 'from the same curious delusion that afflicted poor Birkett when he first came: you appear to imagine yourself a rich man.'

'I shall not ask you again,' Grouchy insisted, assuming a threatening tone that ill became his impotent position. 'Is that your final reply?'

'You treat me, my dear Grouchy,' Stone replied with curling lips, 'as though I were a lodging-house keeper. But I assure you—and let this be the last I hear of it—I do not take in paying guests nor seek payment or any other return for my hospitality.'

Snobbit wiped the soap from Grouchy's face and then stepped back to view his work approvingly.

'Looks much cleaner, now, don't he?' he said to Stone after a moment's meditation. Then he chuckled and added: 'Quite presentable! Why, with that black hair brushed a bit more sleekly and that pale skin that his old beard has kept the sun off for so many years, he only needs an eyeglass in his eye to make him look like a sort of caricature of you, Silky!'

Stone smiled. 'You hear,' he said to Grouchy. 'I told you your appearance would be improved!' Then he looked hard at Grouchy. His smile slowly expanded, and his eyes contracted until he was leering viciously at him. Suddenly he stepped right up to Grouchy, and looked closely into his face. 'But there's room for improvement still,'

he whispered. And throwing back his head he laughed shrilly, devilishly. An icy chill ran down Grouchy's spine, whilst the tears streamed down Stone's cheeks in his fiendish merriment.

'Angelo, illustrious Angelo,' Stone cried, wiping his eyes, 'your brilliance is dazzling! If only the fertile gift of imagination had not been denied you, preventing you from turning your great talents to account, you would have been the most matchless rogue in the history of all creation!'

'He laughs! God help you now, Grouchy,' moaned old Vane from the corner where he still lay huddled in a heap.

Stone paid no attention to the old man's remark. After another closely critical examination of Grouchy, laughing fitfully, he left the room with his accomplices. Grouchy heard the scraping of the bolts as Stone secured the door behind him. It was left to old Vane to release Grouchy from the chair.

Twice during the long day that followed that first morning shave a little poor food and drink were brought to the two prisoners in their attic cell. They both ate hungrily. Grouchy's first distaste for the miserable fare had soon vanished before the insistent demand of nature. The remainder of the day was mostly occupied by a further long cross-examination of Grouchy by Vane, in which the former had to fence with the old man. Grouchy succeeded in deceiving him on the subject of his assumed death, answering the questions which were put to him with a mixture of truth and falsehood. The evasive answers passed; but

though they appeared to satisfy the old man on the score of accuracy, they by no means satisfied him in quantity. Vane would ask another question almost before Grouchy had finished telling a white lie in answer to the one that went before. The old man's thirst for information appeared insatiable. But it was obvious, from the many incompatible statements which Grouchy made, the glaring inaccuracies and inconsistencies of which remained wholly undetected, that Vane's interminable questioning was inspired chiefly by a desire for the constant company of a human voice after his many months of solitary confinement. Grouchy was loath to deny the wretched man the enjoyment of his company, but he was at length driven rudely to shut him up. He wanted quiet, in which he might reflect and attempt to evolve some plan of escape. He had not yet given up hope, like Vane. A plan it was he needed, now and quickly. A plan whereby he might hoodwink his captors. And he wanted his freedom urgently. Stone had laid hands on him already, had had him shaved, and hinted that there was more to come. Grouchy was not going to wait for that. This adventure had already passed the border-line of that secure excitement of which he had at one time quite relished the prospect.

Nothing but an ingenious device would meet his needs. The heavily barred window and the strongly bolted door defied an attack by force. Only yesterday Grouchy had been confident he could evolve a plan as and when he chose. He racked his brains now in an effort to discover some subtle scheme which would outwit Stone and

his confederates and lay open the path for his escape. An hour's deep thought brought no result, and Grouchy was sorely distressed. Until now, he had made light of his captivity, confidently believing himself to be a more clever, a stronger man than Stone. But now his self-assurance began to wane. That very morning Stone had dared to lay hands on him, do what he would with him, laugh at him, and remained unscathed! Such a thing had never happened to Grouchy before. He had never before experienced the sensation of helplessness which now oppressed him. Opposition that he was powerless to overcome or circumvent was new to him. He began to wonder feebly whether he, in time, would find himself in the condition of old Vane—weak, helpless, and inert, relying on nothing but a barren hope that one day assistance would reach him from without. And ever and again the evil thought preyed upon his mind: 'Suppose Hubert, like Violet Brand—' Soon he was forced to admit that he, too, had been relying to a far greater extent that he had thought upon the success of a very doubtful search.

The day and night passed without relief. No subtle plan had come. Grouchy could find comfort only in the thin hope that sooner or later Stone would play into his hands, and the accompanying hope that when that opportunity came he would still have left the courage, the determination and resource, to see it, seize it, and make good his escape.

The early morning of the following day brought Stone and his assistants again to the attic room

where the two prisoners lay, to repeat the shaving of Grouchy.

The latter submitted tamely, reasoning that such submission would save him from being tied down to the chair. He would prefer, he thought, to have his legs and arms free, ready for any emergency. But his reasoning was faulty. As soon as he had voluntarily seated himself and, head back, was waiting for the lathering, he was pounced on and bound as securely as before.

Stone was more loquacious than ever, and beaming with suppressed delight. Grouchy closed his eyes to shut out the mocking face. While Snobbit ran the razor over his face, he fell again to wondering what these villains' purpose could be in keeping him prisoner and in their absurd eagerness to alter his appearance.

Suddenly Grouchy roared with pain. A sharp stabbing pain had burnt into his left temple! He started so violently that, bound as he was, the chair rocked unsteadily for a moment with two legs poised high in the air. When about to topple over, it was caught by Snobbit and set again firmly with its four legs on the floor. Snobbit must have gashed him deeply across the forehead with the razor! Grouchy could feel a warm stream of blood flowing down his face; it blurred one eye, then trickled on down his cheek, and dripped from the point of his chin. The sting of the wound was intense. Stone was shrieking with laughter. For a moment Grouchy writhed under the fierce pain; then, with eyes flashing hatred at the monster before him, set his jaw grimly and controlled his

emotion, determining that Stone should not enjoy his wincing.

Gradually Stone's laughter subsided. Grinning evilly, he gazed down upon Grouchy's expression of fortitude.

'Brave man!' he cried contemptuously. 'Women, I am told, have their faces peeled to restore the youthful roses to their complexions. But that is nothing to this! You, my dear Grouchy, have set yourself to endure with fortitude a greater pain in order to achieve a far nobler aim. . . . It is nearly over now. . . . Cut the top end half an inch further into the hair, Snobbit, and rough the edges of the wound so that it may not heal too cleanly. . . . That's better! . . . So, enough! . . . Perhaps just deeper—' He broke off abruptly. Little old Vane had sprung at him from behind and, with the savagery and strength of horror, was digging his old torn finger nails into Stone's strong throat.

'Devil! Devil! Murderer!' the old man shrieked.

Stone shook him off with ease, flung him to the ground, and kicked him brutally.

'Squeal, you dirty little rat,' he cried, his suave language suddenly vanishing and revealing for a second the brute beast that lay beneath. Then, turning to Grouchy, in a tone full of menace, he cried: 'Beware, Grouchy, lest you follow the example of that filthy old man and dare lay hands on me! Such people live—or die—to regret their hasty action. Birkett already is rotting like a pear in my fruit-room; presently he will have to be

destroyed before he ruins the other fruit.' And he grinned horribly.

Grouchy did not reply; he had not heard. He knew nothing but the terrible sting of the razor which Snobbit, in obedience to Stone, had drawn again across his temple. He broke out into an ice-cold sweat, and the hot stream of blood running down his face seemed to burn like molten metal into his flesh. But he held on grimly, without flinching.

Stone laughed again, and then resumed his tormenting ridicule.

'Women, they say, are vain,' he said; 'but it is wonderful what vanity will make men patiently endure. Here are you, undoubtedly suffering the greatest pain, yet with exemplary stoicism and without one word of complaint, just so that your appearance may be made vaguely to resemble mine. That is a high desire. But your strength of mind and purpose speak more strongly for your good taste than for your clarity of thought. You may be of like stature and of like build to me, you may indeed have black hair like mine and a pale, clean-shaven face of similar shape, and soon you will have a red scar high on your left temple, like mine. But what do such things amount to? Nothing; a passing resemblance, that is all. They will not make you really like me; they would hardly deceive a child. Such points of similarity are purely superficial, and could only successfully impose upon one who was a comparative stranger to us both. Their effect is negligible. It is in the subtle curve of the nostrils, the expression round the eyes and at the corners of the mouth,

that true recognition should be sought. Yet, these bolder and more apparent likenesses will doubtless serve their purpose; they will cover a multitude of sins! You must thank Snobbit, not myself, for the heaven-sent inspiration!' And he laughed riotously again.

For a long time after Stone and his men had gone Grouchy remained motionless in the chair, feeling weak and faint, pressing a rough cloth, which had been cast at him for the purpose, against his temple to staunch the rapid flow of blood.

'This disgusting cruelty can serve no purpose,' he said at length to Vane, when he could trust himself to speak without a quiver in his voice. 'We have fallen into the hands of a madman whose sole and vile hobby appears to be a mania for disfiguration.'

'More than that,' replied the old man; 'a madman, yes, but a murderer, too! After he has tortured us a little while longer, he will weary of his sport. Then he will kill. You heard his simile of the rotten pear? I am to be cast aside soon. You, perhaps, will be kept to be made sport of a little longer; but in the end you, too, will be destroyed.'

'If ever I live to be free, then God help him,' cried Grouchy, rising and shaking his fist at the bolted door. 'And God help those others, too, who gave us into his hands.'

CHAPTER VI

HOW VANE WENT TO HIS DEATH

February and March slowly dragged out their weary course. April came; and the early spring tinted the woods and hedgerows a delicate green. But the two men remained in their captivity and knew only the change of season by the relief of returning warmth.

No fresh torture beyond Stone's unending mockery had been inflicted upon them since the day Grouchy received his scar. And the only fresh departure in Stone's evil ridicule had been that Grouchy, now, was always called by the name of Stone in recognition of his superficial resemblance to Stone himself.

Neither Grouchy by himself nor he and Vane in concert had been able to devise a scheme whereby they might regain their liberty. On one occasion, as a last desperate expedient, force had been resorted to, taking the form of a sudden attack on the man who brought the two prisoners their food, and who, upon that particular occasion, was believed by them to be alone. But nothing had come of it. Snobbit and a third man who had evidently been keeping watch quietly outside the door, at the first sound of the disturbance, had rushed into the room and laid about them; and

they, in turn, had, after a moment's struggle, been reinforced by Stone and yet another man from down below.

Hope of escape or rescue slowly ebbed from Grouchy's heart. The spring found him, like Vane, waiting despondently, inertly, for the final scene. Both silently prepared themselves for death, which each in his inmost thoughts believed not very far away. Stone was wearying of his cruelty, they could see that. His prisoners could only be a burden to him now. He would remove them at his convenience. One day he would bind them and, laughing, cut their throats as coolly and with as little compunction as he had Grouchy's forehead sliced open for his fiendish entertainment.

One day—Grouchy reckoned that it must be early in May—Stone entered the attic-room, carrying over his arm what, at first sight, appeared to be a bundle of rags. He laid them at the foot of Vane's bed, exclaiming:

'See Birkett, I have brought you a new suit of clothes!'

Vane blinked and opened his mouth to speak.

Stone held up a hand. 'No, don't embarrass me with the expression of your gratitude. Come, try them on, and see whether the fit and cut are to your liking.'

The old man was made to rise, strip off the miserable garments he was wearing, and don the even more filthy rags which Stone had brought.

'Charming, charming!' Stone declared, when Vane stood in tatters before him. 'Far more becoming to your present style. Quite romantic!

Imagine a report of this in the daily papers. It would, I think, be stated thus: " Rich man wears rags as protest against modern extravagance in dress, and advocates the adoption of sumptuary measures by the State." Ha! Ha! I declare the idea nearly carries me away.'

The old man muttered inaudibly.

'What is your opinion, Stone?' Stone asked, turning towards Grouchy. 'Do you not consider the rural charm of our mutual friend vastly enhanced?'

'I hold one opinion only,' Grouchy growled fiercely: 'that the hottest corner of hell would be too trivial a retribution for your blackguardism.'

Stone took no notice of the abusive remark. Quietly gathering up the clothes which Vane had taken off, he departed.

'The end is creeping closer,' said Vane calmly, mastering his weak spirit and determining to meet his fate with resignation. 'These rags will be my shroud. As early as to-morrow you may be alone.'

'Here or hereafter,' Grouchy cried, 'it matters not which, but there will be revenge. God is as vengeful as man. Stone cannot escape; he is far more prisoner than we. Death can give us rest, but neither life nor death can bring quietness to the soul of Stone. My God, if only I could have my freedom for a little while before I die, Stone and others would learn the measure of my hate.'

Late in the day, when the sun had sunk far down

behind the pines, the two prisoners lay on their beds in silence. Vane lay still, a calm expression on his face, watching the dim light fade utterly from the room. He had persuaded himself that Death would come with the night.

Grouchy moved and turned restlessly on his bed. He, too, had a strong presentiment that Vane would not be alive at dawn; and the knowledge of his own helplessness to avert the impending tragedy weighed intolerably upon his mind. Silently, he pledged himself to wreak the uttermost revenge on Stone and his confederates if ever he should escape.

As the last light vanished from the attic room the door was opened. No one entered. From beyond the open doorway Stone's voice called:

'Meyrick Vane, kindly accompany me downstairs.'

Vane rose laboriously from his bed. As firmly as his weak legs would carry him he walked over to Grouchy and said:

'You hear, friend Grouchy? He calls me by my real name now. He treats me as already dead; and mocks the Creator, for He, perhaps, is the only one who will recognise in the dead Birkett the Meyrick Vane that was.'

'Come,' called Stone irritably. 'There is no time for sentiment.'

Grouchy, quivering with fury, sprang up and clenched his fists as though gathering himself for an immediate assault on Stone, whose outline could be dimly seen standing in the doorway. But Vane, divining his intention, gently restrained him and pressed him back on to the bed.

'No good would come of that. That would not help,' he said and, turning, walked steadily away.

'Adieu,' the old man called back from the door.

Grouchy heard the men go stamping down the narrow staircase. 'With two in front and two behind he goes to his execution,' he cried, shuddering. 'Oh, horrible! Is there no justice upon earth? Is God so contemptuous of the justice of mankind that He allows such horror to proceed, waiting for us to prosecute before His Throne?'

He heard the quiet hum of a car starting away round the corner of the house.

'There goes the hearse!' he groaned, and, burying his face in the pillow, he stopped his ears.

CHAPTER VII

GROUCHY HITS OUT AND GETS MURDERED

Two evenings later, while Grouchy was sitting alone in the attic cell, leaning on the table, slowly sipping a mug of tea, which, forgetful of all else but despair, he had left standing until it was cold, the door opened and Stone entered. Grouchy's thoughts were far away. He noticed no sound until Stone addressed him.

'Lately, I fear, my dear Stone," Stone began apologetically, 'my attention has been so utterly absorbed by the detailed and complicated work which I have had to do in connection with our friend Vane, that I have been sadly neglectful of my duties and obligations towards yourself.'

'I have not missed you,' replied Grouchy without turning round, still staring dully before him into space.

'However,' Stone resumed, brushing aside Grouchy's comment with a wave of the hand, 'I will endeavour to make amends, now that I am less hampered, by concentrating my attention exclusively upon you. As an earnest of this, and to show my anxiety to avoid displaying more favour to one than to another of my guests, you will notice that I have brought you some articles of

clothing, which I trust you will not consider it beneath your dignity to accept. Here is a lounge suit which was recently made for my own use by one of the best tailors in Saville Row. But the cloth, which I liked in the piece, proved to be less becoming than I had hoped when made up. I have only worn it on a single occasion. And here are some more trivial vanities, ties and the like, which also I have bought for myself from time to time. I will leave them all for you. At your leisure try them on. If they do not prove satisfactory and to your taste, they shall be altered or replaced. You would hardly approve—'

'As with Vane,' Grouchy interjected, speaking to no one in particular, 'these are the last rites, similar to extreme unction in point of time.'

'Please, please, I beg of you, my dear Stone,' expostulated Stone; 'your thoughts are too gloomy for words! Really, it is inexcusable to introduce such morbid and depressing subjects.'

Grouchy turned suddenly and faced the speaker.

'Tell me, you devil,' he cried, 'what have you done with Vane? Where is he now?'

'What have I done with him?' Stone answered, looking puzzled. 'What have *I* done with him! I do not understand you. I have no idea where the dear old man is at the moment. How should I? Indeed, I have not seen him for the last two days. He wearied of our society, I am afraid. He was difficult to please, an irritable old gentleman. But perhaps it is a trifle dull here between the shooting seasons. Anyway, he went away.'

'You shall tell me,' cried Grouchy with a faint

hint of the old powerful determination ringing again in his deep voice. 'Answer me; where is Vane's body now?'

'Bless my soul, my dear fellow! What next? Body? Morbid is not the word; you horrify me with your gruesome—'

But Stone got no further. With a swift movement, taking Stone completely by surprise, Grouchy sprang at him, seizing him fiercely by the throat. Stone was a big man, of Grouchy's own size, but even under normal conditions no match for him in strength and agility. And now Grouchy dug his thumbs into Stone's wind-pipe with the added strength of long pent-up fury and bitter hatred. Stone's cry of alarm was smothered before it ever left his lungs. Except for the slight scraping of the two men's feet upon the naked boards, as they swayed to and fro locked in a deadly embrace, silence reigned in the attic. Relentlessly, Grouchy bore Stone back, maintaining the suffocating pressure. Slowly, Stone's eyes dilated, his knees weakened. Wildly, but with ever decreasing force as his strength ebbed, Stone tore and clutched at the inexorable grip. Grouchy dug ferociously into the firm but yielding flesh, and smiled with concentrated hatred into Stone's face as he forced him slowly back and back until Stone's body lay full length along the table, his legs dangling over the end, kicking frantically, convulsively in the air.

'What have you done with Vane, murderer?' Grouchy whispered, bending close down to Stone's ear. 'Think what you have done with Vane. And make your peace quickly! This is only my

revenge on earth, nothing to the torture of eternity! Another minute and I, too, will be a murderer. Prepare! Your life is nearly gone!'

Slowly, Stone's limbs relaxed. His face turned purple in the last mad struggle for breath. His arms sought wildly for a purchase which would give him leverage for one last expiring effort. His hands found only the old tin mug half full of cold tea, which, sweeping across the table, they sent hurtling towards a corner of the room. It fell and ran a little way along the floor with a hollow rattle. The sound attracted a voice, which called quickly from outside the door:

'You all right, Silky?'

'Perfectly. Enjoying myself,' answered Grouchy, imitating as best he could Stone's slow drawl. And he leant over and grinned terribly into Stone's writhing face. 'He is not coming. Another minute!' he whispered.

The pupils of Stones eyes rolled up until they vanished behind his upper lids. Staring eyes of white looked up at Grouchy. A last convulsive kick by Stone caught the rickety wooden chair at the foot of the table and sent it spinning. It banged and clattered its lurching way across the room, pitching finally against the door.

'What the deuce are you up to in there?' a voice cried. The door opened and Snobbit looked in to reassure himself as to the harmless nature of the commotion. With a cry of alarm he rushed at Grouchy and tried to drag him off his victim, at the same time shouting wildly for assistance. Grouchy clung madly to that yielding throat, and

as he was dragged back, dragged the limp body of Stone after him by the neck.

'Another minute,' he roared. 'You are too late! I can hold. Another minute. You cannot stop me now!'

Two more men came racing upstairs. They flung themselves upon Grouchy. His hands were torn away, and his arms pinned behind him. The limp body of Stone fell outstretched upon the floor. With superhuman strength Grouchy strove to reach that inviting body, to close his hands again upon that tempting, crimson neck, to press his heel hard down upon that throat, to do anything, anything to maintain that deadly pressure but for a few seconds more. But Snobbit and the two other men held him fast.

'You fools!' he cried. 'Another moment and the Devil himself would have had a rival in Hell!'

Stone lay deadly still.

'You've killed him,' said Snobbit, leaning over Stone's body and feeling for respiration.

'Not yet,' cried Grouchy. 'But one day I will. Nothing on earth can stop me. He cannot escape me now.'

All the old mastery and confident determination found their place again in Grouchy's ringing voice. The fight had revived his courage and his failing faith. At last he had had something tangible against which to test his strength. All the weary hopelessness that had been engendered by months of exasperating captivity had vanished utterly in the exhilaration of the struggle. He no longer feared the future. His star had risen again. It

was he, not Stone, who would inevitably conquer in the end. . . .

After a little while Stone moved and his chest heaved quickly. Grouchy laughed as he watched him gasping faintly, struggling for life.

'Live on now,' he cried, 'if you dare face the future.'

Presently Stone dragged himself into a sitting posture. Choking violently, he glared hideously at Grouchy.

'I warned you, Grouchy,' he said painfully; 'I warned you never to lay hands on me. You did not heed my advice. So be it.' He turned to his men and ordered: 'Strip him. Dress him in those other clothes. Then bind him. He and I will have a long talk later under more pleasant and secure conditions. My God! What a fool you've been, Grouchy!' And he rose and walked unsteadily from the room.

Grouchy, unresisting, had allowed himself to be dressed in the new apparel which Stone had brought. He had not even struggled when his legs and arms were being strongly bound by innumerable turns of broad soft bandages. When all had been completed, looking like a mummy, he had been laid on his bed and Stone's men had departed.

For hours, it seemed, he lay there, staring up at the ceiling, unable to move, waiting for death, which he knew, if Stone's arrangements went smoothly, would overtake him before morning came again. But he noticed neither the passage of time nor his acute discomfort. Nor did he

tremble at the thought of approaching death. The exhilaration of the fight still possessed him. He lay still, confident, contemplating the future without fear.

Stone could not kill him now. His spirit was quieted by the knowledge that Stone now feared him, knew that, man for man, he, Grouchy, was the better, the stronger of the two. Stone would know no rest now until he, Grouchy, was dead. To-night! If Stone's arrangements went smoothly! They wouldn't. Stone could not kill him now. A cross had been marked on Stone's line of fate. From now onwards he, Grouchy, would direct the struggle. He knew not how, but an overwhelming sense of security made him feel that this was so. His again was the magnetic optimism which would draw success into its path. He had won back his certainty, the sure shield of his fortune. Stone was now the frightened, anxious man. And a man in that mental state leaves gaps in his defences which are surely penetrated by defeat. The very bonds which held Grouchy were Stone's acknowledgment of fear. An expression of supreme content lit up Grouchy's face as he lay there, waiting—waiting for Stone to come on his mission of death. He, Grouchy, was again master of his fate....

In the late evening, Stone came to Grouchy's bedside. He gazed down at his victim with his usual sneering smile.

'That smile is more forced to-night,' thought Grouchy, undismayed.

Stone made a careful examination of Grouchy's

bonds to assure himself that there was no possibility of a further assault.

'You are safe for the moment,' said Grouchy, smiling.

Stone looked uneasily at his easy-smiling captive, and asked himself what this man could be thinking of that could make him appear so unaffectedly contemptuous and unafraid. He fetched a chair from the middle of the room, brought it close to the bed, and, sitting down on it, began to speak.

'Your pleasant little diversion this afternoon,' he said sweetly, 'so endeared you to me that I feel I cannot let you go without taking a man who has proved himself so worthy of it more fully into my confidence. Therefore, so that you may reap the full enjoyment from them when the time comes, I propose to describe to you beforehand the details of my plans, in which, shortly, you will play a leading part.... You will be inexpressibly grieved to hear that I, John Stone, have decided to commit suicide. But I am anticipating the conclusion of my story; for the moment, dismiss all thoughts of sympathy from your mind and listen to the beginning of the tale.' A look of venomous hatred settled on his face as he talked, and as he unfolded his vile scheme he watched eagerly for signs of fear to show themselves upon Grouchy's impassive face. 'A little over eighteen months ago I found myself—I will be frank—rapidly coming to the end of my resources; to put it vulgarly, I was getting short of cash. I sought about for a plan whereby I might replenish my failing store. It is a sad reflection upon our civilisation that such

sordid occupations as "money-making" should have to be indulged in before cultivated people like ourselves can obtain the means to enjoy a full life. But that is neither here nor there. It is only material to my story to this extent: such a thought prompted the passing reflection that there must be many people in the world who had large fortunes coming to them eventually, fortunes which were indeed already within their reach if only they could remove some other person who obstructed their immediate accession. That reflection, combined with the thought that there must be many of these potentially wealthy people so ardently desirous of immediate accession to their distant riches that they would be willing to pay handsomely for the swift and secret removal of all human obstacles standing in their way, together constituted the inspiration upon which I soon based a plan of action. Upon those twin thoughts I founded the occupation in which I am now most fruitfully employed.' He paused to let the dreadful significance of his words sink into Grouchy's mind.

'The truth,' he resumed presently, 'upon which the successful issue of my labours hinged in the temporary profession which I then adopted, was merely this: that if a person is to be removed without fear of arousing the slightest suspicion this desirable result can easily be obtained provided the circumstances of the desired death speak plainly for themselves and require no further examination or elucidation. I will explain myself by giving you an illustration. Violet Brand was my first client; let us therefore take the case of her stepfather, Meyrick Vane. Now he, as you

must have read in the papers many months ago, was the victim of a fatal railway accident. True, the accident had a flavour of suicide about it, but that did not matter. Accident or suicide, it was all the same to me. The important point was that there was never a suspicion of foul play. The case was plain. "Res ipsa loquitur," as the lawyers say. The only difficulty which arose in his case was that the body which was found had, for reasons I need not go into for the moment, to be other than that of Vane himself. But this did not present a very formidable obstacle, for we realised that Violet Brand herself would be the person called upon to identify it, and she being with us, this superficial difficulty at once dissolved into thin air. For who was likely to disbelieve the poor distracted orphan's evidence? Being secure in this, the most vital point of all, the rest was simple. All that was necessary was, first a body sufficiently similar in physique to that of Vane—there is always a selection of bodies to choose from readily obtainable by those who know where to go for them; secondly, that the body should wear Vane's outward trappings—these Vane carried on his back and were to be had for the asking; and thirdly, that the face of the false body should be rendered totally unrecognisable before being placed on the spot where the accident or suicide was to occur. As you know, these small matters were all easily arranged. And it was worth some thousands to me. There was only one slight hitch, and that a temporary one. The body which did duty for Vane had an awkward scar on the hip which we had carelessly overlooked.

Its sudden discovery at the inquest gave us a moment's hard thinking. But Violet was equal to the occasion. She invented a tale of a native riot in India. She is a clever and courageous girl! . . .' Again he paused.

'You follow the general idea, my dear Grouchy? Now let us pass on. Your own case, my second, was more cunningly and artistically conceived. It was at once simple, neat, and perfectly effective. And the method employed for your removal had the additional merit of obviating the necessity for post-mortem identification, and the rather clumsy and, I admit, dangerous expedient of using a counterfeit body which, at times, is liable to lead to unforeseen results.' He waited to be questioned; but Grouchy gave no sign that he was even listening. 'You, my dear Grouchy, landed at Southampton with my other luggage. None of it had to be examined by the Customs, as, fortunately, I had temporary possession of papers showing that I was joining the Roumanian Embassy. The English are so nice about such things! So courteous! They do not look at the baggage of members of the Diplomatic Corps. I would not, of course, really be an accredited representative of that small nation, but one has to do strange things at times. The borrowed passports served their purpose, served to remove you, just as the train served to remove Meyrick Vane. And here, perhaps, I might insert an explanation of the question which I slurred over a few minutes ago, the question why, if a person is to be removed at all, he should not himself be destroyed at the time of his supposed

death, suicide, or disappearance. To take the cases of Vane and yourself, why was not he himself placed under the passing train and why were you not thrown into the sea? The answer is interesting. It is a curious fact that in the psychology of most persons who not only desire but are actually willing to concur in the removal of those who obstruct their paths to fortune, there is, nevertheless, a deep-rooted repugnance to being the direct cause of death. They draw the line at nothing but that. Violet Brand flatly refused to be a party to the killing of old Meyrick Vane. Before she would move at all in the matter, I had to assure her that I would keep him in a lunatic asylum or in imprisonment of one kind or another; she was not particular as to details, only insisting that he must be kept alive. She lacked vision. It was foolish, squeamish of her, but there it was; she shrank from murder and, being a business man, I had to accept the position and meet her wishes at the time. It was exactly the same in your case; I was not permitted to destroy you, desirable though that result would have been. But you will appreciate the fact that, with the cost of living as high as it is to-day, I cannot go on keeping prisoners like you and Vane forever. I have, therefore, somewhat reluctantly been obliged to go behind the original contract in each case and adopt the practice of exterminating my prisoners after a period of captivity. When that has been done, I notify the persons who placed them in my charge. As a matter of fact, I told Violet Brand that her stepfather was dead some little time ago. At the time, it wasn't true; but that was a minor

detail. It was all " arranged " and, with me, that is almost a synonym for " done." She complained bitterly of my breach of faith, but she could hardly do more; she was herself too deeply involved. She should have thought of it before. It will be the same in your case, I have no doubt . . .' He paused for a long time. Grouchy still gave no sign that he had heard.

' This question of the removal of prisoners,' Stone went on eventually, ' brings me to the last point which I need make. It is a golden rule that if you have a body of which you wish to dispose without fear or suspicion, you must first create an identity for it and then get rid of it in the full light of day. Unnamed bodies, promiscuously concealed, seem to work themselves out of their hiding-places in the most astonishing manner and with systematic regularity. Awkward inquiries then ensue. You can read reports of such cases nearly every day in the papers. But if, on the other hand, a body is found which there has been no attempt to conceal, and, moreover, if that body has an identity, though perhaps an unknown identity, and is surrounded by all the circumstances of natural death, then, after a brief fruitless search for relations, it is usually quietly buried at the minimum of expense by the local authorities of the place of decease. No suspicions are aroused. Bodies thus dealt with lie peacefully enough in their public graves. Thus Vane died a few days ago; satisfactorily, as I am at present advised, dying both naturally and as Birkett. Of course, no one knows who Birkett was, or where he came from; and these facts will never be discovered,

since such a person never existed. Yet to those foolish people who have charge of his remains, Birkett is undoubtedly Birkett. It would occur to no one unfamiliar with higher philosophy to deny the existence of some one who appeared plainly to exist. And, as a whole, the police force is not well versed in such academic conceptions. Therefore, I am hopeful that, as the body of Birkett which has been found is unquestionably a body and as unquestionably the body of a man called Birkett, Vane will shortly be buried quietly and economically and trouble me no more. So much for Vane.... And now what next? I have another prisoner to be rid of!... But I see I am beginning to weary you; I will not bother you by telling you what is going to happen to him, but hastily conclude by describing the tragedy which is about to happen to myself. As I have already told you, I have decided to commit suicide. Various reasons have forced this decision upon me. I am in my own way; when I am dead, I shall be able to move more freely. My landlord has lately been applying to me most importunately for payment of rent; certain unaccommodating local tradesmen have impertinently expressed the desire to have their accounts settled forthwith; my bank balance under the name of Stone is already overdrawn, and I have only three pounds in notes and fourpence halfpenny in loose coin about my person. Indeed, I am excessively worried....' Stone, grinning, drew from his pocket some Treasury notes and coins, together with an assortment of dunning letters from local tradesmen. After counting out the sum of three pounds and

fourpence halfpenny, he displayed it with the letters before Grouchy's eyes, and then distributed them amongst the pockets of the latter's clothes.

'Indeed,' he resumed, 'what is more natural than that I should commit suicide? I have no longer any paying patients in this house. I have no means of paying my debts. It is obvious that I must drown myself. That is a muddy but not, I am told, an altogether unattractive death. It does not improve the appearance. The flesh becomes soaked, flabby, and colourless, the face expressionless. That is a pity from one point of view, but from another a happy incident of that form of extinction. For my landlord, furious at being cheated out of his exorbitant extortions, will almost certainly come to gaze indignantly at my corpse. So will the local butcher, I expect. He is a hard, unpleasant man, with all the morbid sentimentality common to the lower classes. If they come, they will see my heavy body, clean-shaven face and black hair, and notice the familiar scar on my forehead standing out clearly against the grey swollen face. The clothes, which are clearly marked, the papers in the pockets, the characteristic eyeglass slung round the neck, will all tell the same tale. . . .' He paused and, removing his monocle, passed the loop of the ribbon upon which it was hung over Grouchy's head. 'The identification, where otherwise incomplete, will be fully borne out by dear Angelo and the others here, they being the only persons who have more than a nodding acquaintance with John Stone. There will be no trace of foul play. Money will still be in the

pockets; and soft bandages, though thoroughly effective for the purpose of binding anyone, leave no bruise or other enduring mark of their pressure after they have been removed. And I shall not be stunned or forcibly held under the water until I am drowned. I shall first be chloroformed, and then, after my bindings have been removed, I, the man John Stone, will be allowed gently to slide foremost down the river's bank to the water's edge. My nose and mouth will remain under water until I am perfectly drowned, and then, and not till then, my body will follow my head and I shall float gently down the stream. What could be more charming, my dear Grouchy, on a May morning!' He laughed nervously. 'Two birds will be killed with one stone by my suicide. An inconvenient body, yours, the body of John Stone the suicide, will be buried by the local authorities, and I, the real John Stone, will also cease to be. I will be free of the past and of the present, free under another name, to utilise as it may best please me, without fear of hindrance or interruption, the money I have so well and ably earned.' He leaned forward until his hot breath smote on Grouchy's immobile face. 'There, Grouchy, is the tale that you may tell your Maker when you make your supplication to Him to-night!' He broke off abruptly, and gazed anxiously at Grouchy.

Unemotionally, Grouchy had been listening intently throughout the long narrative. He fully realised the dreadful import of Stone's words. He was to be foully murdered in a few hours' time. But he did not flinch. He had been ready for it,

expecting it, for days; the bare narration of its incidence could not terrify him now. And all other thoughts paled into insignificance before the inconceivable hatred of Stone which now filled his heart. The display of calculating villainy which had just been paraded before his eyes by the beast beside him had only served to strengthen him in his unreasoning optimism. Now more strongly than before did he feel the certainty that he would live to avenge these ghastly crimes; for how could success walk longer side by side with such a creature as this Stone? He would live on to avenge Vane upon Stone and Violet Langton, and himself upon Stone and—

Dreading the answer, he steeled himself to ask one question.

'Who gave me into your hands?' he asked.

'Why, who but your amiable and dutiful nephew, Hubert Marr.'

'You lie,' muttered Grouchy, wincing.

'Nine thousand pounds you've cost him, and he owes me another three,' Stone cried, delighted at finding at last a way of hurting Grouchy.

'You lie!—you lie!'

'I quoted him a very moderate price,' Stone answered, 'for he is so singularly attractive.'

'You lie!' cried Grouchy. 'But I shall learn the truth. You know you cannot kill me. It is I that will do the killing.'

Stone shifted uneasily. His last and most poisonous attempt to torture his victim had not been a success. Where he had expected terror, he had found defiance. Defiance which rang with certainty! Had Grouchy more than hope? What

could be working in the back of Grouchy's mind? Could there be a hitch somewhere? . . .

'Gag this wretch,' he called nervously to a man outside. 'He is beginning to bore me.'

'Nothing can save you,' said Grouchy defiantly.

Late in the night, Grouchy, gagged and bound, was carried downstairs to a waiting car, and bundled inside. Escape must come quickly, if it were to come at all. . . . Grouchy's eyes shone brightly, fearlessly, above his gag. He was waiting for his opportunity, watching confidently for the first signs of its certain approach.

Every little while during the short drive, Stone, hoping again to stab the victim, put his mouth close to Grouchy's ear and whispered some remark, such as 'Dear lad, Hubert! Such zest and abandon!' or 'What is twelve thousand to Hubert now? Pooh! He spends that yearly on his women.'

To one of these remarks Grouchy replied by looking Stone full in the face and winking. Yes, he actually winked! Stone didn't like it. He could not understand such behaviour by a man in Grouchy's position. Grouchy seemed to know, he thought, something which gave him hope, or even more than hope, certainty of escape. Stone became acutely nervous. Could one of his men have ratted? he asked himself. He looked at them, two inside and two outside the car, searchingly.

Perhaps Grouchy had managed somehow to communicate with the outside world. Perhaps a trap had been laid for him by Grouchy. Per-

haps . . . He spoke no more, but watched every movement with deep suspicion.

A few minutes passed; the car drew up in a narrow lane. Grouchy was lifted out and carried a few hundred yards along a river-bank to a spot where the river curled its sluggish way through a small wood. There, where the overgrown banks shelved gently to the water's edge, he was deposited on the ground amidst the undergrowth. Stone, now looking nervously around with haggard, anxious face, knelt down beside him and drew a small bottle and some cotton-wool from his pocket. He moistened the wool and placed it against Grouchy's nose. The sickly odour of chloroform floated up into the still night air. . . .

Grouchy fought, fought like a madman, till the veins stood out like thick cords upon his forehead, not to breathe. . . . Was this the end? Could he have been deceiving himself? . . . A few seconds passed and his lungs could no longer support the effort. He took a deep breath, then another, and another. His head began to swim. He felt himself turning, turning, spinning like a wheel. Slowly at first, then faster, faster. . . .

Valiantly he struggled to stem the approaching unconsciousness. He saw an electric torch flicker and distinctly heard Stone's voice saying: ' He's going under. You can unwind the bandages now.'

Here was his chance at last, thought Grouchy. He would be free before the anæsthetic had done its work. He could hang on for another minute. . . . Then strike out. . . . Take to the water. . . . He would swim . . . escape . . .

Swiftly, and with ever-gathering speed, he spun . . .

Swim . . . another minute . . . hold on . . . another . . .

Consciousness was gone.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PRECINCTS OF HEAVEN

THE touch of the ice-cold water on Grouchy's face revived him. Strength and departed consciousness returned. His bonds were gone. He was free, free to fight, to swim, to make one supreme struggle for liberty. He struck out ferociously with his arms and legs. One wild swing of his fist was checked suddenly by soft warm flesh. He heard a cry of pain.

'Hell-hounds! Murderers!' he roared and redoubled his unaimed blows.

He felt himself slip, then fall a little way. Ah! this was the river-bank. He was free and still conscious! In a fraction of a second he would be in the river. And he still had strength left in him to swim. He would yet cheat Death and Stone of their prey! As he landed hard and flat on the water, he struck out desperately with a powerful side-stroke.

But what hideous nightmare was this? Fate was laughing at his frantic efforts. He could make no impression on the water, could not even dig his nails into it! This surely was death finding him at last. He gave in utterly; he could fight no more. Slowly, with one last fearful cry,

he rolled over on to his back and lay still. . . . Lying on the top of the water or beneath it? He didn't know. With his eyes wide open, staring up to Heaven, he waited for the end. . . .

For some minutes he lay motionless. Then he realised that a great light from above was striking right down on him, blinding his eyes. Heaven? So soon!

'Lord, Thy dazzling brilliance—' he muttered, blinking, and, slowly dragging himself into a sitting position, rubbed his eyes and stared heavenwards again at the dazzling light.

'I don't understand,' he murmured, as he gazed upwards. Surely this was no heavenly light which shone full upon him. It looked like an ordinary gas-filled electric bulb!

Grouchy lowered his eyes and, blinking hard, looked around him with a sorely perplexed expression. Then he pinched himself severely in the leg until he winced with the pain of it. But he only shook his head sadly. Everything seemed so real, but—no, it was impossible. He appeared to be sitting in a white-painted bedroom on a hard rush mat which lay on the linoleum-covered floor beside the bed. And from the look of the bed he might just have fallen from it; the bed-clothes hung in tumbled confusion over the side against which he sat. In the corner of the room nearest Grouchy stood a little wizened man wearing thick horn spectacles and a nanny-goat beard, trembling and rubbing his cheek. Two tall thin boys, also bespectacled, and a large, stupid-looking woman stood huddled together close by the half-open door, staring anxiously at Grouchy, and obviously

ready to beat a precipitate retreat through the doorway should he move again.

Grouchy looked from one to another of these strange creatures in absolute bewilderment. No theological treatise he had ever read, from Dante to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, had ever forecast an after-life of this character of Heaven or Hell with such inhabitants. He gave it up and lay down again with a groan.

'The poor man has had a fit.' It was the woman who spoke. 'Leander, run quickly and fetch a glass and some brandy from the tantalus in the dining-room.' The taller and weedier of the two boys hurried out of the room to do her bidding.

'Bring two glasses,' the little nanny-goat man squeaked after him, still tenderly caressing his cheek.

A moment later the boy returned, bringing with him two glasses and a decanter of spirit. Having filled the glasses, the woman gave one to the nanny-goat man and then, standing some feet away as though fearing contamination or assault, with a trembling hand at the end of an arm stretched out to its full extent, offered the other to the prostrate Grouchy. Grouchy accepted it with mumbled thanks and sipped its contents, while the woman retreated hastily to her post of vantage by the door.

Though at an utter loss to imagine how on earth he had arrived in his present surroundings, the warming flow of brandy left Grouchy in no further doubt that he was still enjoying ordinary mortal existence. He was not drowned—not yet.

In some miraculous way Stone had been defeated! He surveyed his surroundings again. . . .

'I apologise for upsetting you, but you have no cause to be alarmed,' he said, seeing he must say something to allay the fears of these agitated people. And then, noticing the little wizened man still gently rubbing his cheek and remembering the sensation caused by the impact of his fist upon flesh during his imaginary struggle for liberty, he added:

'I greatly fear, sir, that I must have struck you during—er—during my—er—fit.'

'You did, sir—a cruel blow!' piped the little man unforgivingly. 'And your language, sir! With my wife and children in the room—' The two boys tittered stupidly at the memory and received a fierce glare from the little man.

'I am exceedingly sorry,' said Grouchy. 'It was an accident, I assure you; I little thought it was you when I struck. But I will explain that later. Would you tell me how I came here?'

'You know very well,' cried the little man angrily. 'It is for you to give me an explanation of your conduct first! We caught you fairly and squarely by the river-bank. How dared you, sir!'

'Ah yes, the river-bank—of course, I remember now,' said Grouchy, repressing a smile with the greatest difficulty at the little man's menacing tone. 'I will explain at once. I was going to commit suicide—I remember distinctly. I am deeply grateful to you, sir, I shall never forget it. Indeed, your timely arrival saved my life.'

'No! No! No! That won't do,' the little

man cried, his nanny-goat beard bristling furiously. 'You can't humbug me like that. I have had to deal with people like you before; I know your kind—stick at nothing and say anything. But I am Professor Dudgeon!' He wagged his little head as though meaning to convey: 'You know the name well enough. That will show you that you can't fool me.'

'I apologise again,' said Grouchy, attempting to humour him. 'I did not realise who you were. You are right; I did lie to you; but I will tell you the truth now. I was not intending to commit suicide; I was on the point of being brutally murdered! You evidently intervened at the crucial moment and saved my life—somehow—for the moment.'

The little man looked as though he would explode with rage and advanced threateningly upon Grouchy. But Grouchy seized him violently by the wrist and shouted in his ear:

'That is the truth—the truth, I tell you. Murder is loose to-night! Is every door and window locked and bolted? Have you any fire-arms in the house? Any minute you may expect visitors—a gang of murderers! They are certain to come. There is not a moment to lose. I will tell you the rest directly. I am speaking the truth—'

Grouchy spoke so earnestly that his words carried conviction with them. The pale faces of the two boys became deadly white; the big woman stepped back and fell into a chair; the expression of furious indignation died from the little man's face and gave place to one of abject terror. He

seized Grouchy by the hand and dragged him from the floor.

'Come round to the house with me,' he piped frantically. 'Who are these desperadoes? God help us! Why did I ever save you!' And he rushed Grouchy out of the room.

Together he and Grouchy made a tour of the doors and windows of the house and, from a cabinet in the professor's study, they took a rusty old revolver which looked as if it had lain there undisturbed for a decade at least. It was loaded; but Grouchy offered up a silent prayer that they might not be called upon to test the serviceability of its mechanism or ammunition. Presently they returned to the bedroom in which Grouchy had originally found himself and locked themselves in with the woman and the boys.

'Now tell me quickly,' said Grouchy to the little professor, 'where I am and how you saved me from those men. I must know how to act.'

The little professor, despite his shattered nerves, puffed out his chest with pride as he told his story, regarding himself, now, as the conqueror of a gang of murderous men, the intrepid saviour of a man from an awful death.

'I am Professor Dudgeon,' he began importantly. 'You will know the name; it is the best known of all entomologists—'

'Yes, yes, but quickly,' Grouchy urged.

But the professor was not to be hurried through what he considered by far the most important part.

'I and my two sons,' he went on, 'had waited up late in order to beat the bushes in my wood by the stream for the larvæ of the sub-angled hawk-

moth— *Smerinthus strigilarius*, you know—for which my wood here is one of the few known localities. The larvæ feed by night on the sallows that abound by the river-bank—'

'Never mind all that,' cried Grouchy desperately. 'Come to the point.'

The little man was offended, but went on faster than before.

'When we were approaching through the wood and had come close to the river, we observed through the trees an electric torch flickering among the sallows by the water's edge and heard some hushed voices. I have caught people poaching *Smerinthus strigilarius* there before, and immediately jumped to the conclusion that these were trespassing collectors—some of them will stick at nothing to add a few specimens to their collections. We ran at them, and I in my extreme agitation shouted: "Hands up! Hands up!" as I ran. The men scattered as we came upon them. We heard them bursting through the undergrowth and tearing down the river-path as we approached. Then, when we were looking to see what damage they had done, we came right on your body lying by the bank. I thought you were one of them and had fainted from fright at my shout. We carried you back across the meadow to the house and were sponging your face with cold water when you revived and struck me in the face.' The little man remembered his sore cheek and nursed it again sorrowfully.

'How simple!' murmured Grouchy, smiling at the thought of the weak little professor and his

two lean sons running to attack Stone and his men. They would certainly have run in the opposite direction had they known who these men were and what devil's trade they were pursuing! Grouchy's life had been saved by a most extravagant fluke, thanks to the sub-angled hawk-moth larvæ—whatever that was—and the unconscious courage of the professor and his two sons and the suspicious fears of Stone.

'God moves in a mysterious way! . . . So I am free and alive.' And Grouchy laughed; but he checked himself quickly. True, he was free and alive at the moment, but from this moment he would have to begin defending both his freedom and his life if he were to live on to wreak his revenge upon Stone and his associates. The expression on his face became hard and rigid. He would carry out his vow. Alone and unaided he would track those devils to their doom. Alone! Only thus could he make his enemies suffer the full measure of his revenge—a drab trial and execution were too small a retribution for their atrocious deeds. He himself would execute the natural justice of man upon earth, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. Stone would fight him step by step, it would be a duel to the death; for in his last mocking talk Stone had told him more than he could let any man know and live. But Grouchy had no fear. Now he was free, he could meet Stone on level terms, he would pit his own ingenuity and resource against that of Stone. He knew his man and he knew Stone's ways; he was ready and he was confident. He could match Stone and beat him in square and

level fight. He had done so once already. To-night, the second round of the contest would be fought . . .

'Now, what are we to do?' the little professor was asking excitedly. He had forgotten his heroic rôle and was becoming panic-stricken again, gazing anxiously into Grouchy's impassive face. 'I have no telephone. We cannot call the police. No neighbours. Oh, dear!'

'How long is it since you found me?' asked Grouchy.

'About an hour—you took so long in coming to. But what are we to do?'

'Leave everything to me. Just answer my questions, then do as I say. How far are we from the wood?'

'About a hundred yards. A line of trees and a dry water-course runs from it to this corner of the house. Oh, dear!'

'What else surrounds the house?'

'A small garden and flat meadowland.'

'And below this room, what is there?'

'One like it, our morning-room. But what are we going to do if the men come here?'

Grouchy did not reply at once. He did not know. He sat rigidly still, thinking out an answer to that vital question. Stone and his men would have only run in momentary fright or perhaps merely with the object of drawing off their assailants from his body. They would not have gone far, of that Grouchy was certain. They would soon return to the scene of their interrupted murder, and realise that the body of their victim must have been carried to the house near

by. They would surround the house. They were probably watching every avenue of escape from it already. If they did not catch Grouchy attempting to get away, they would come, break into the house, and search for him. They must; they could not risk leaving him until the day.

The sound of a dog barking furiously somewhere away at the back of the house broke the silence of the night.

'They are coming! They are killing poor Ponto!' wept the professor's wife hysterically.

'What are we to do?' moaned the little professor despairingly.

'I will tell you,' said Grouchy, without a quiver in his deep voice, and running across the room he switched off the light and then came back and silently slid open the window. Looking out, he saw two dark figures stealthily approaching across the lawn. No doubt the others were beyond, waiting and ready for him if he should attempt to bolt like a rabbit. He turned from the open window and went up to the trembling professor.

'Yes, they are coming,' he whispered. 'Listen carefully. Do exactly as I tell you and you will be in no danger. I will look after myself; you must not risk yourself again for me. Go with your family to the hall. When they come, let them in and tell them that I am here upstairs. Show them the way. They will do nothing to you; it is I they seek. Don't be frightened. Now go, wait for them below.'

'I cannot,' moaned the little man, a faint flicker of manhood showing itself in his voice. 'I cannot. They will kill you.'

'No, trust me,' Grouchy replied earnestly. 'If you do as I say, you will not betray me; you will have saved my life again.'

The poor little man drew himself to his full five foot five and, shaking in every limb, tried to assume a lion-hearted expression. He beckoned to his wife and sons, who were huddled together in one terror-stricken mass, as though awaiting their own immediate execution, to follow, and led the way downstairs.

Before the party had negotiated the first flight, a loud, resounding knock shook the front door, and a bell tinkled somewhere away in the kitchen quarters. The professor's wife screamed. They all hesitated, and the professor looked back at Grouchy appealingly.

'Do exactly as I told you,' Grouchy whispered encouragingly over the banisters. 'They will not touch you.'

The family advanced again. Then, as Grouchy saw the little professor walking unsteadily across the hall to do his bidding, his family herding together close behind him, all with their terrified eyes glued upon the front door, he himself slipped silently and unnoticed down the stairs and, quietly opening the door of the room directly beneath the bedroom, passed into the darkness within.

From his place of concealment Grouchy heard the professor fumbling at the bolts and chain of the front door and the intermittent sobs and fearful chokes of his stricken family. A moment later, the heavy door creaked back on its hinges. Now the little professor was expostulating faintly with a man whose coarse voice sounded like that

of Snobbit. Another scream from the woman and hysterical cries from the boys told Grouchy that they were probably experiencing for the first time in their dull lives the sensation of having a revolver pointed at their heads. A wild cry of 'No, don't—don't shoot!' from the woman confirmed his guess. Grouchy smiled at the thought that the little professor was now, in all probability, meekly putting up his hands, oblivious, in his abject terror, that in one of them he still grasped his own rusty old firearm.

'Then tell us where he is hidden,' shouted the coarse voice.

'I haven't seen any one,' the professor protested.

'Damn him for his idiotic chivalry!' thought Grouchy, and, swiftly crossing the morning-room, he flung open the window with a resounding clatter that echoed through the house.

'There! You're lying!' yelled the coarse voice triumphantly. 'What's that noise, eh? Where is he? Quick!'

Grouchy waited no longer. He slid through the window he had opened and dropped into a thick clump of iris growing in a narrow bed against the house. He glanced up quickly and saw the open window of the bedroom directly above his head. He jumped slightly forward and pressed his feet hard into the soft loam beyond the patch of iris. He took one pace forward towards the gravel path that skirted the bed, and let his foot again sink deeply into the soil. Then he stepped quickly back into the iris patch and climbed lightly back through the window.

'Tell him. You cannot save him,' the woman was screaming in the hall. 'Then I will! He's up in that bedroom, there! There—up there! That's the door.'

'Thank God, there's some one with courage enough to give me away,' murmured Grouchy, with a deep sigh of relief. And as he heard Stone's men rush upstairs and burst into the room above, he gently closed the open window beside him.

The men stamped about the room above. From where he stood Grouchy saw a man appear out of the dark and come running across the lawn to the house in response to a shrill whistle that came from the open window above. He heard some husky orders being shouted down, and watched the man outside the morning-room window bend down, examine the deep footprints in the flower-beds, and then shout something back. The men above came clattering down the stairs, and ran out of the front door without, apparently, taking any further notice of the professor and his family. A moment later Grouchy saw Snobbit and another man join the man outside. He watched Snobbit flash a torch and stoop to look closely at the foot-prints in the flower-bed, and then, followed by the others, lead the way at a fast run across the lawn, that evidently being the direction in which Snobbit thought Grouchy's tracks would have led had he been able to see indentations upon the hard gravel path or frosty lawn.

'Elementary, my dear Snobbit,' muttered Grouchy to himself in grim humour. 'Stone, your secretary is a fool! Why didn't you come

yourself? You would not have been foxed so easily, and by so old a trick.'

Grouchy stepped out of the morning-room into the hall. The little professor, mopping his fevered brow with one hand was vainly endeavouring to shoot the front-door bolts with the other. His family were piled on a sofa in a state of utter hysterical collapse.

'He'll never escape! I know he'll never escape,' the little professor was moaning as he rattled at the refractory lock. 'He'll be murdered! It will be our fault—your fault, Esther, for giving him away. And after I had saved him!'

'On the contrary,' laughed Grouchy, 'I owe Mrs. Dudgeon my gratitude.'

'Who's that?' cried the professor, spinning round, terrified afresh at the sound of the voice. 'You! Oh, dear! I don't understand anything.' And he went limp all over and leaned against the door for support.

'Yes, it is I, safe and sound—thanks to Mrs. Dudgeon giving me away. It's beginning to look now as if I shall not be murdered after all!'

The whole family stared blankly at Grouchy. The professor's wife was the first to find her voice.

'Who was that terrible man with bloodshot eyes?' she crooned, shivering at the memory.

'Let me see,' answered Grouchy blandly. 'Oh, yes, that would be Angelo Snobbit, an ex-hairdresser with homicidal tendencies.'

'Why should he want to kill you?'

'Well, you see, I hold heretical opinions on the

subject of coiffures,' answered Grouchy with a smile.

'You are laughing at us,' said the Professor ruefully.

'Yes, I am afraid I was. I am sorry; I should not do that. I owe you too deep a debt of gratitude for what you have done to-night; more indeed, than any man could repay. I am ungracious and ungrateful. Forgive me. To say that at first they wanted to murder me because they were paid to get rid of me, but now, because they dare not let me live, would be nearer the truth. But don't ask me to explain everything now; it is a long, long story, and I am exhausted. Only the excitement has saved me from collapse.' He swayed a little where he stood. 'If you could give me a bed? . . . I don't think we shall be troubled again to-night.'

The little professor was both flattered and relieved. He looked forward eagerly to the morning, when he and this man—this man whose life he had saved twice in one night—would go together to make their report to the police. How well it would look in the papers!

'Of course we will give you a bed,' he said. 'But I don't even know your name yet?'

'My name—er—my name is John Stone,' Grouchy replied, also reflecting that the professor would undoubtedly rush to the police the next morning to tell them the whole story, and at the same time remembering that Stone had told him that the world believed Grouchy was dead. So much the better. Grouchy should remain dead. If he was to pursue his revenge alone and in a

manner not countenanced by the law, it would not do to begin by declaring the fact of his real identity and his continued existence to the world. . . .

'And you're quite sure they won't come back, Mr. Stone?'

'Practically certain,' answered Grouchy. 'They will be far too busy scouring the neighbouring countryside for me.'

The professor asked no more questions, but led Grouchy to the bedroom where he had originally found himself. There Grouchy flung himself, just as he was, upon the bed. He heard the Dudgeon family all move off together to another room, evidently having decided that, after the fright they had experienced, there would be no sleep for them, and agreed to drive away their fears by talking until the light came.

Grouchy smiled happily, thinking of the restless night Stone and his men would have, searching for their lost victim. And he smiled grimly at the thought of the revenge that he would begin exacting on the morrow. And, then, he knew no more. . . .

CHAPTER IX

THE PHILOSOPHICAL CARRIER

With the dawn Grouchy awakened from the first, deep, health-giving sleep he had enjoyed since that memorable night in January when he had last crossed the Channel from Havre to Southampton. He felt refreshed and reinvigorated, ready for any activity which his new-found freedom and his vow of revenge together might entail. For some time he lay deep in thought; but at length he rose and stole softly downstairs. He wrote a few words of gratitude to his host, signing himself John Stone, and left the note on the hall table where it could not easily be overlooked. Then, noiselessly, he let himself out of the house.

He felt rather ashamed of himself. It was ungrateful to slink away like this before any of the household were about; but less so, he argued, than waiting and concocting a false story in answer to the professor's inevitable inquiries later in the morning. Moreover, if he waited, he could see no way to avoid accompanying the professor to the police. That would put him in an impossible position. He could not make a false statement to them. And the publication of the truth would inevitably ruin the schemes he had in mind.

Making full use of the little cover he could find and casting wary glances about him, he slipped

unseen across the narrow lawn, through the small wood, and then along the path that ran beside the river-bank. Presently he came to a highway. Here he hesitated, not caring to show himself too freely and go marching boldly down the road, wherever it might lead to, for fear that some of Stone's men might still be lurking in the vicinity, watching the roads and surrounding meadows, knowing well that Grouchy could not have travelled far in the darkness of the night. He waited, hidden in the hedgerow, hoping for some vehicle to come along which might afford him company, protection, and concealment on his journey to a neighbouring town.

Presently his patience was rewarded, for he saw a covered cart in the distance approaching along the road which ran like a narrow ribbon over the brow of a low hill to his right. When it reached him, and was about to cross the bridge which spanned the narrow river on his left, Grouchy came out from his hiding-place and, hailing the driver, asked for a lift.

'Where do you want to go?' asked the driver.

'To Burford,' answered Grouchy at random, noticing written up on the canvas hood of the cart:

A. NOBLE,
Carrier,
Chipping Norton and Burford.

'Then you had better wait there until I come back,' said the carrier jovially, 'for I am bound for Chipping Norton. You'll only have to wait a few hours, no more!'

'Chipping Norton will do as well as Burford for me,' said Grouchy, laughing; 'I'll go there instead.' And without waiting for a reply, he jumped up beside the ruddy-faced driver.

The carrier scratched his head and looked at Grouchy with surprise, but whipped up his horse and drove on without comment, while Grouchy stepped over the driver's seat and settled himself down amongst the many odd packages under cover in the body of the cart.

'Now, you're what I call a wise man,' the carrier began, after a long period of intense meditation, 'though most people would call you mad. But what does it matter, I say, whether one goes to Burford or to Chipping Norton, or to Bristol or York for the matter of that, on a glorious May morning like this. A wise man, I maintain, is he who comes and goes as the wind blows, and cares not, seeing only the Glory of God in the brooks and pastures.'

'Then I am even wiser than you think,' Grouchy replied, entering into the spirit of the carrier's quaint speech. 'Until I saw the names of Burford and Chipping Norton written up on the hood of your cart, I had not the remotest idea even what part of England I was in, beyond knowing that I was within half a day's motor-drive of Southampton.'

The driver looked over his shoulder at Grouchy and made a wry face.

'I took you for a wise man,' he said laconically, 'but now I see you are a fool!'

'How so?' Grouchy asked.

'Do the low rolling hills here remind you of the

Lincoln Fens or are they as naked and solitary as the South Downs? Do you see red Devon earth around you, the pastures of the Weald, or the moors and fells of the Southwest and the North? None of these wonders. The old nag and I have plied our trade in the East, West, South, and North; in flat and in hilly country; wild and gardened; red, white, grey, green, purple land; hedgerows and stone walls; sluggish streams and rapid torrents—there's no two bits of this country as are alike. But this means nothing to you, so it seems. That's why I dub you a fool. The wise man knows all this, and can tell at a glance where he is, within a mile or two. You disappoint me; golf or food-producing are your two sorts of countryside, I suppose!'

Grouchy took his correction in good part.

'You misjudge me,' he said humbly. 'If you love the land, I love the sea. And I know the sea and its signs every bit as well as you know the countryside. And perhaps I don't know the countryside as little as I made you think.'

'The land and the sea both sing the same song,' said the remarkable man, warming again towards his passenger. 'The sea speaks also to the Glory of God. But how came you to be standing in the road when I was passing, and not knowing what part of the country you were in nor caring where you went?'

'The answer to that would be a long tale,' Grouchy replied. 'I was brought to these parts some months ago and never told where I was being taken to. This is the first time I have been abroad in the daytime since.' He spoke frankly.

He instinctively liked the man and felt he could trust him to this slight extent.

'Shut up in a madhouse, I suppose,' said the driver with a sigh, but without the faintest suspicion of rudeness in his voice. 'They do shut up the likes of you and me. But never mind; we're sane enough, you and I. It's those who are left to go free, those who lock us up, that are really mad. And here's proof of their insanity; it's a spring morning like this that heals the mind, not a prison or asylum, as folks would have us believe. But the so-called sane, they don't know this. Why? Because they're mad. They gather in cities, stunt their bodies, and go mad. Then they shut up the sane, who yearn for the pure air, along with other idiots, because they can't understand them. They don't know what medicine for the troubled mind the countryside and sea provide or how they rest the soul in the Glory of the Lord.' 'The Glory of the Lord' seemed to come as a refrain at the end of nearly everything he said.

'There I agree with you,' Grouchy replied slowly; 'and when I have finished my work on land, I will try and put your principles into practice and go to the sea that I love to find peace for an unquiet mind.'

'And what keeps you now?' the carrier asked.

Grouchy's face became set and hard as he replied: 'A man keeps me. There's a devil in him; and there's a devil in me now. The world is too small for both of us. When I have finished with him and with his friends, I will go to the sea. Perhaps I shall have need to forget much then.' And his breath passed sharply between his clenched

teeth as he thought of Stone, Violet Langton, and perhaps—perhaps Hubert Marr.

'I do not fully understand,' said the carrier quietly. 'But never mind; I can give you good advice without knowing any more. Forget these people of whom you speak. Go to the sea now, if you are troubled in your mind. Forget! Why not? Surely what others do is no concern of yours. Leave them to do their evil or their good. Forget all and look only upon the Glory of the Lord.'

'If you knew all, you would not say that,' cried Grouchy fiercely. 'Forget all! It is not possible. Not now. Until a little while ago, like you, I neither cared nor concerned myself with the acts and impulses of other men. I went my own way. But suddenly I was thrust, all unsuspecting, into the very centre of a hideous plot, with murder as its central theme. And now—now I will see it through to the end. Perhaps I, too, will—' He broke off abruptly, realising that he had said more than he had intended, and looked hard at the carrier. The latter was listening unmoved, and after waiting a minute to see if Grouchy would finish his sentence, began again:

'The more you tell me, the more needful does the sea appear,' he said calmly. 'You talk of murder and hint at killing yet to come. But what does all this idle chatter amount to? Why trouble yourself with your little story? What if there is one evil man less in the world, plenty will remain. Suppose the particular one, or more, you have in mind were to die, would you trouble your head about all those others? No, you would not give

them more than a passing thought. But still you cannot forget these particular ones who have touched you as you passed on your way. Do you believe that he and his friends are worse than all those others, that they have caused more pain than all the rest? You think you do, only because you have come close to them and seen the evil that walks with them while the work of others has been hidden from your eyes. But listen to me. One story is like another; all is pain. They only differ in the people which they touch. Here is a golden rule of life: know no man, and each man is your friend. If any man comes too close to you, move away; it is foolish to stand in his path and refuse him passage. Ask no questions. Let other men come and go upon their own errands without hindrance. How can they concern the man who listens only to the many voices of the woods and rivers? That is real companionship, and in that there is no sorrow, only joy. Rest yourself in Nature's lap. That is the only way for man to become again part of the Lord's creation and know the blessings of His bounty.'

'Your philosophy is impossible,' said Grouchy rigidly. 'How can I forget these monstrous iniquities? It is impossible. And I have sworn—'

'Say no more,' broke in the carrier sadly. 'You're just like all the rest. I have talked to many as I have talked to you. All for some reason unfold to me their secrets and I give them all the same advice. I have grown used to hearing them say "Impossible!" as you have done. So, when we get to Chipping Norton, you will go your weary, struggling way. No good will come of it;

sorrow, nothing but sorrow is to be found along the path you tread. Maybe, in years to come, you'll be passing this way again. I shall still be listening to the chatter of the birds, and the soft whispers of the cornfields, marvelling at the Glory of the Lord. Be you then rich or poor, you'll turn your head away from the sight of my gladness and stifle your regrets that you did not follow the way I once pointed out. But there it is. " Impossible!" It's sad. Let's talk no more of it on a morning like this.' And he shook the reins to urge on his dilatory nag.

Grouchy spoke no more. He stared sullenly before him, every little while shaking his head as if repeating to himself: 'Impossible! Impossible!'

Some little distance farther the carrier turned his cart into an ill-kept carriage-drive and drew up in front of a dilapidated house that stood well back from the road.

' One delivery to be made on the way,' he said, bringing Grouchy sharply back to ordinary thoughts. And reaching back for a large parcel, he handed it to Grouchy.

' Jump down and deliver it for me while I right this rein,' he said. ' The small service shall be your fare for the lift.'

Grouchy climbed down with the parcel under his arm, went up to the door, and knocked. He knocked again, louder, and still no answer came.

' I don't think there can be any one in,' he called to the carrier.

' Knock again,' said the carrier from somewhere

by the old nag's head, where he was busily adjusting a leather.

Grouchy hammered the knocker so vigorously that the heavy door, not fully caught on the latch, swung open before the pressure of his blows. Something in the dingy nakedness of the empty hall that confronted him arrested his attention. Unconsciously, almost, he glanced down at the label on the parcel which he held:

JOHN STONE, ESQ.
Hill House
Nr. Chipping Norton
Oxfordshire

With a cry of alarm he dropped the package, clenched his fists and looked about him savagely.

'This is a trap!' he cried.

The carrier, hearing the cry, stepped up to Grouchy.

'What ails you, man?' he asked; but without waiting for a reply, picked up the parcel and stepped inside the door.

'Any one here?' he called out, and advancing right into the hall, repeated his call. 'Any one here?' Still no one came. He placed the parcel on a broken wooden chair near the front door and came out again on to the doorstep, where Grouchy still stood rooted to the spot.

'No, no one there,' he said. 'They were there yesterday, I know, for I delivered a suit of clothes which the tailor in Banbury had been making for the gentleman here. Well, they'll find the parcel when they return.'

'They won't return,' said Grouchy. 'They

dare not, now I am free. They will have gone, leaving no trace. They will hide themselves in dark places watching for me.' And he thought: 'They must have been badly unnerved to have cleared like this.'

'Maybe. They may be gone, they may be "hiding in dark places"—it's no concern of mine,' said the carrier, speaking for the first time with a note of irritation in his voice. 'But as for the rest, if they're after you, the more reason for you to go to the sea.'

Grouchy did not answer; he just shook his head. The carrier shrugged his shoulders and made no attempt to return again to his favourite and, perhaps, only topic of conversation. During the drive along the few remaining miles to Chipping Norton, he kept himself company, singing in a deep, melodious voice of the sunshine and the flowers.

CHAPTER X

A PLAN OF CAMPAIGN

THAT quaint, perhaps half-mad, but estimable man, A. Noble, carrier, put Grouchy down close by Chipping Norton station. From there, the latter took an early-morning train to London which ran into Chipping Norton station after he had been waiting only a short while. A couple of hours later it landed him at Paddington.

On arrival in London, Grouchy made straight for the station hotel and breakfasted. The meal he ordered caused comment, amounting almost to consternation, amongst the hotel staff, accustomed as they are to the abnormal appetites of famished travellers. But long after his hunger had been fully assuaged his appetite remained unsatisfied. He could justly plead in mitigation of his apparent greed that though it was a long time since any food at all had passed his lips, it was longer still since he had eaten decent food. At length, however, he was replete. With intense satisfaction he paid the bill out of the money which Stone had for a very different purpose thrust into his pockets the night before, and, having discovered from the waiter the way to the nearest public library, he rose and left the hotel.

As yet, Grouchy had formed no definite plans.

His present intentions were first to read through the back numbers of the papers to find out, as far as he could, exactly how matters stood, to discover what story had actually been accepted by the world as an adequate explanation of his disappearance, and to glean any other information which might have a bearing on his position. Then, with the aid of that knowledge, he would formulate a detailed scheme of revenge. At present, apart from his assumption, from what Stone had told him, that somehow his apparent death had been encompassed, he knew nothing.

In the Paddington Public Library he settled himself down in front of a file of the *Morning News* and turned back the pages until he reached that issue which had come out on the day of his disappearance. Naturally enough, there was no reference to him there; the morning paper had been published too early to contain an account of the occurrences of the early hours of that same day. But it commented gloomily and at length upon the strength of the storm that was then raging in the Channel, forecasting casualties amongst the shipping and other dire calamities. The edition of the following day, however, contained a full report of his disappearance, and also, in the form of an obituary notice, a short account of himself. Grouchy then learnt for the first time that the obvious explanation—that he had been swept overboard and lost in the raging sea during his passage home—had been accepted and death by drowning presumed. Further down the page condolences were expressed for Hubert Marr, who, by all accounts, had been terribly distressed when it

had become apparent that all hope for his uncle's life would have to be abandoned.

Grouchy read and re-read these accounts, pausing for a long time whenever he came to those passages which, however slightly, mentioned his nephew, vainly endeavouring to read between the lines and discover whether Hubert's distress rang true or not. But with only this slight material he could come to no definite conclusion. He passed on to the issues of the succeeding days. From these he learnt very little more. A memorial service had been held for him a few days after his supposed death, which Hubert had been forbidden by his physician to attend on account of the severity of the shock he had received. And it was there stated in parenthesis that Hubert had been ordered a complete rest and darkly hinted that the young man's condition was causing considerable anxiety. Grouchy found nothing there to implicate his nephew in the plot to secure his removal. In fact, on the face of it, everything pointed in the opposite direction. He heaved a deep sigh of relief. Perhaps Stone had lied, and some one else had been at the root of the trouble. But suspicion was buried too deep in Grouchy's heart for him to be able to root it out upon such inconclusive evidence as that—evidence which might so easily be wholly misleading. He called to mind Violet Brand's prostration at the time of Meyrick Vane's ' accidental ' death, and determined that his nephew's innocence would have to be tested more fully. If Hubert was guilty, then he should suffer with the rest. . . .

There was one other question to which Grouchy

hoped to discover the answer in the newspapers, and he now sought for that in the issues which had been published during the last few days. He searched these issues minutely. One little paragraph attracted his momentary attention. It was an announcement in the society column that the Hon. Mrs. Thomas Langton—Violet Brand that was—would be returning from Le Touquet, where she and her husband had been staying for a few days, on Thursday afternoon, but that her husband was intending to remain abroad a short while longer. The thought of that woman, leading a complacent, idle, luxurious life, made Grouchy shudder. She would not enjoy herself much longer, he vowed. He would be ready for her by the time of her return! The mention of the day of the week reminded him that he was oblivious both of the day and date. He glanced at the current edition and noted that it was Wednesday, May 4th. So Violet Langton was returning on the morrow! 'Not much time, but doubtless long enough,' he muttered savagely.

But Grouchy did not dwell on these points; they were not the main objects of his present search. He pigeon-holed them in his memory for future use and passed on. Presently it appeared that he had discovered the particular item of news for which he had been seeking, for he gave a short gasp, bent his head down and read one of the news columns intently. It was a short article in the Monday edition headed: 'Tragedy near Seaford.' And it ran as follows:

'Yesterday morning a party of visitors at Seaford who were walking along the beach in an

easterly direction towards Birling Gap were shocked at finding, about midway between the two places, the body of an old man lying on the upper shingle. The man was dead, having evidently been killed as a result of falling from the top of the cliffs, which, at this point, are close on eighty feet high and extremely precipitous. The body has been sadly broken by the fall, and death must have supervened instantaneously. The party abandoned their intended picnic and, returning immediately to Seaford, notified the police of their tragic discovery. Later in the day the body was carried to a mortuary in Seaford, where it now lies awaiting identification.

'The name of the dead man appears to have been Henry Birkett, and, judging from his dress, he was a labourer of some sort. It is surmised from his general appearance and emaciated condition that he was a member of the unemployed who, having failed to find work in Seaford, was walking along the coast to Eastbourne to search for employment in the latter resort when he met his death.

'The police are conducting inquiries. Any person who is able to give information concerning the deceased which might aid in establishing his identity is asked to come forward at once.'

The Tuesday paper had a further slight reference to the tragedy. The dead man, it stated, was apparently unknown in Seaford; inquiries had failed to elicit any information about him or to find any one with whom he had been working or even to whom he had applied for work in that part. The request for information was repeated.

The only issue of the paper that had been published since—the current Wednesday copy—contained no reference at all to the affair.

The paper's unsuspicious attitude testified to the efficiency of Stone's method. There was no suspicion of foul play. But the very openness of the crime, which had been intended, Grouchy well remembered Stone declaring, to be its sure protection, was now its very weakness; for there was one man now who knew the truth, against whom absolute concealment would have been the only possible defensible armour. And that man was free! Even now, he, Grouchy, the self-ordained avenger, was gathering his strength for the relentless struggle. He clenched his teeth as he sat reading those articles, thinking of poor old Vane, chloroformed most likely, being thrown over the brink of the steep cliffs. Grouchy shook his fist in the air at a conjured vision of the mocking face of Stone. He swore that this demoniacal crime should be fully expiated. Stone, Violet Langton —and Hubert Marr with them if he were guilty —should all pay in full. . . .

Grouchy pushed the file of papers from him and sat back in his chair. For a long while he sat thus, his head bowed on his chest, plunged in thought. Gradually a vicious smile spread over his face, as he slowly conceived of a plan for revenging Vane and himself. A deeply satisfying plan it was; a plan whereby Stone's own weapons would be turned against himself and his accomplices; a plan so deeply laid that, though directed superficially against Violet Langton, it would provide also preliminary torture for Stone and Hubert

Marr and lead naturally on to their defeat. It was a plan so cunning that it could be carried out by Grouchy alone without the necessity of publicly declaring himself to be alive, though the police might unwittingly be brought in to play a part, thus enabling him to execute the full measure of his revenge unknown. And, last but not least, it was a plan so subtle that though the execution of it would be public, its intention would remain veiled, except to its victims, for whom it would be full of dreadful menace. They alone would understand its object and endure the terrifying agony of the knowledge that at any moment the veil of secrecy might be torn aside, leaving the naked horror of their deeds exposed to the view of all. Violet Langton would be the first to go; next, Hubert Marr if he were guilty of that damnable treachery; and last, Stone. Stone would be reserved to the end, for the last final blow. . . .

'Yes, I shall be ready for her,' murmured Grouchy, as he thought again of Violet Langton returning on the morrow.

CHAPTER XI

BENYON, OF MESSRS. BENYON, BENYON, SON & BLUTT

But there were two matters which required Grouchy's attention before he could put his plan of vengeance into execution. He had to provide himself with the necessary funds and he had to determine finally the question of Marr's complicity. To achieve these ends, after considerable hesitation, and only in default of other means, he found himself compelled to confide to a small degree in his old friend Benyon.

Benyon, now senior partner in that old and reputable firm Messrs. Benyon, Benyon, Son & Blutt, had been at school with Grouchy, and the close friendship which had been formed between them in those early days had ripened with the passing years. Grouchy trusted Benyon. Benyon was now not only Grouchy's frequent companion and his only confidant and adviser, but also, in a professional capacity, his solicitor and the sole executor and trustee named in his will. He alone was in a position to give Grouchy the assistance and information which at the moment he required, and, at the same time, be trusted to give it secretly.

But Grouchy was determined to confide in no

one, not even Benyon, to an unlimited extent. No one but he himself and his victims should hold the secret of the avenging deeds that he had planned. Benyon, too, must somehow be deceived. With this purpose in view Grouchy, before going to see Benyon, called at the shop of a hairdresser, a leading wig-maker and specialist in make-up, and from him secured a black beard and moustache, similar to those he had always worn in the past. Benyon was to be prevented, if possible, from recognising his old friend Grouchy in the description of a wanted man that might soon be published. He should see him as he used to be—with black beard and moustache—and not as he was now. Grouchy optimistically relied upon Benyon's excitement at seeing him again alive aiding in the deception. It was unlikely that Benyon would look too suspiciously at features he had always known as real. The astonished and unsuspecting Benyon would be an easy prey to such deceit. After considerable difficulty in finding a set of black whiskers of sufficiently good fit and after a long time more spent in trimming them into satisfactory shape and exercising other of the subtle artifices of make-up, Grouchy left the shop looking once more amazingly like the Grouchy of old. There was little but the unnatural sheen on his beard and moustache to betray their falseness.

From the hairdresser's Grouchy walked straight round to the offices in Lincoln's Inn of Messrs. Benyon, Benyon, Son & Blutt. There he inquired for the senior partner, announcing himself by a strange name, the first that came into his head.

He thanked heaven, at that moment, that it had never been his custom to go personally to those offices. The clerks there did not know him; only Benyon would recognise him, and Grouchy could stop him shouting abroad the news of his return.

Benyon, a short, thin, wiry little man with iron-grey hair and a face that beamed with good-natured intelligence, rose from the desk at which he was working on hearing the name of a new client announced. As the door closed behind Grouchy, he came forward with outstretched hand, murmuring a formal greeting. But the moment his eyes rested full on Grouchy's face he stopped dead, and his outstretched hand fell limply to his side. He gazed at his visitor with an expression full of startled inquiry and his greeting died upon his parted lips.

'Yes, it is I,' said Grouchy calmly, noting Benyon's utter dismay, and holding up a warning finger. 'It's I, come back to life again. Don't look so startled. I am flesh and bone. Touch me and make sure. You'll find you can't walk through me!'

Benyon passed a hand across his eyes, and looked again at the apparition before him. Then, with half-laugh, half-sob, he walked slowly up to Grouchy and clasped his hand.

'And now I don't know what to say to you, Cormack,' he confessed, intensely moved. 'Come and sit down, and let me just look at you again. It—it sounds so foolish, so inadequate to say: "I am so glad." Where have you been? Where have you come from? What was the meaning of your —your death? How on earth—'

'Steady!' laughed Grouchy. 'Not all at once. Only one question at a time.'

Benyon took a deep breath and tried to control his emotion.

'You must expect to find people a little surprised to see you,' he replied, laughing also. 'Resurrection is unusual to say the least of it! What does it all mean? Where have you been?'

'Just making a scientific investigation into the possibilities of life after death,' Grouchy answered.

'Your experiments have proved highly successful!' cried Benyon. 'But it's not fair to joke when you see that I am eaten up by curiosity.'

'I came to you, Jim,' Grouchy said, suddenly becoming serious, 'because I don't want to answer those very questions you are putting to me, and you were the only person in the world whom I could trust to be patient and to be silent. I knew you would not press me to say more than I want to say. I'll explain everything one day; not now. Let it suffice for the moment that for certain reasons I wished to disappear for a time and still want to remain unknown, and to be thought dead by every one except yourself. I can trust you, Jim; and I ask you to tell no one that I have returned, not a single soul, not even Hubert. Don't look askance at me like that. God knows I hate to make a mystery of everything like this, but promise to keep my secret.'

Benyon thought for some time before replying, and then only parried with another question.

'Do you think that is quite a fair game to play?' he asked.

'Why not? Whom does it affect but me?'

'You may well ask, whom does it affect,' Benyon said slowly. 'The answer is obvious and gives rise to the suspicion which prompted my question. It is a nasty thought. Think it out for yourself. You don't understand? Well, you might have disappeared in order to discover how Hubert would behave after you were gone. A worthy heir—'

'No! I give you my word, such an idea never entered my head. You know I would not have played so low a trick as that. Now give me yours that you will do as I have asked.'

'Very well, I promise.'

'That's more like you. You trust me still. That finishes that. Now tell me your news. I know nothing of anything that has happened since the day I was—I was drowned. To begin with, how is Hubert?'

Benyon averted his eyes under Grouchy's eager gaze.

'You have told me nothing,' he answered evasively; 'and if you still wish to remain as though you were dead, I need tell you nothing.'

Grouchy winced at Benyon's obvious reluctance to speak frankly. 'Don't avoid my question, Jim,' he said bitterly. 'God knows I don't want to hear anything unpleasant. But if there's bad news, tell it to me now. I am playing a straight game. I'll prove that to you to this extent, if you still suspect that I am merely playing an underhand trick on Hubert. I promise to alter nothing in my will, not one single word, unless you yourself advise me to do so. You know what is in my will

—everything left to Hubert. Will that satisfy you? Now answer my question honestly.'

'I shall hold you to that promise,' Benyon replied. 'And now I will answer. The position is this: your disappearance has had a bad effect on Hubert. He has never been quite himself since that dreadful day. He collapsed; his nerves have been all on edge since then. At times he has behaved almost as though he were becoming unbalanced. For some weeks he went into a nursing-home, but he's out now. And personally I don't think the rest did him the slightest good. Frankly, Cormack, my opinion is that his mind is no longer as sound as it was. He was very devoted to you, you know, though at times he had a queer way of showing it. Then that sudden shock came. It was enough to bring out that touch of lunacy that was on his father's side. That or something very like it has happened.'

'Poor boy!' murmured Grouchy. And silently he cursed himself for ever having listened to Stone's infamous suggestion. But after a moment, he looked anxiously at Benyon and asked: 'But is that all? Why should you fear what I might do if that was the whole substance of your news?'

Benyon looked away. 'It's not all,' he said; 'but it's hateful to have to tell you all this. Surely Hubert has suffered enough and proved his loyalty. You don't want to hear the other side of the story from me. Let him tell it to you himself. Let us leave it at that.' He hesitated, but Grouchy only murmured: 'Still you don't trust me,' and waited in grim silence for him to continue.

'He has run through a great deal of money,' Benyon resumed presently. Again he hesitated.

'I don't mind,' said Grouchy encouragingly.

'Not yet, perhaps,' Benyon resumed. 'But he's been even more profligate than you imagine. Almost directly after you—after your disappearance, he came to me and said that he must have nine thousand pounds. Nine thousand pounds at once!' Grouchy started violently. Nine thousand pounds! The very figure Stone had given as the sum Hubert had paid! . . . But he held his peace. Benyon, staring out of the window, noticed nothing and went on: 'He said he had been borrowing before you vanished, but had been frightened to tell you. He wanted to pay off the sum at once, to stop the interest accumulating. At first I refused, and suggested fighting the claim if he had got into the hands of money-lenders. But he made a secret of the whole matter, said it was a debt of honour, that he had been a fool, wanted no publicity, and so on. He insisted on having the money paid over to him. I couldn't do more than protest; for, you remember, against my advice, you left everything to him absolutely. And you were supposed to be dead. I used what persuasive arguments I could think of, but he was stubborn. I had no other choice than to let him have the money as soon as your estate was sufficiently wound up to admit of the payment being made. Even then, I exceeded my strict rights and tried to discover where the money went. But Hubert kept his secret well; he did not pay the money over to his creditor by cheque, but drew the whole sum out of the bank in cash and paid it

away in that form, I suppose. . . . And that's not all. The last few days he has been worrying me for a further three thousand, part of the same debt, apparently, which he had not mentioned before. He swears this will be the final payment. I was making him out a cheque for this amount when you arrived. Here it is.' He handed a cheque over to Grouchy for him to see.

For some moments Grouchy sat in frozen silence, staring at the cheque in his hand. Three thousand pounds! Stone's bitter sneer, 'Nine thousand pounds you've cost him, and he owes me a further three!' tore madly at his tortured mind. With shaking hands he tore the cheque into minute fragments and threw them on the floor. So Stone's story had all been true! Hubert had paid that devil nine thousand pounds and still owed him three. A debt of honour, Hubert had called it! Hubert had considered the removal of his uncle worth twelve thousand pounds! Maybe he had even thought that cheap; for what did a paltry twelve matter out of the many thousands which such treachery would win him! And had Hubert ever stopped to think what would happen to Grouchy? It was all hideous, disgusting, devilish! Grouchy no longer needed to steel his heart to perform the acts of retribution he had set himself. In that moment the weakness nourished by surviving hope vanished utterly. All was horror! His face became transfixed with an expression full of evil menace.

'You will make no further payments to Hubert,' he said in a cold, dispassionate voice. 'Say that questions have arisen as to the validity

of my will or make whatever excuse you like, but pay not one single penny more to him. Say what you will, anything, provided you do not tell him either that I am alive or even that you suspect that I am still living. But that you have already promised. There is one more thing that you must do for me. Cash me a cheque for fifty pounds and let me have the money—I suppose I can still call my money my own, even though I am dead?'

Without asking any further questions which, from the hardness of Grouchy's tone, Benyon knew would, for the present, have to remain unanswered, he made out a cheque for the sum named and sent out for the money.

'Don't be too hard on him,' he said after a long silence. 'He was always extravagant, you know. You let him have too much money to play with; you spoilt him so.'

'Yes, I spoilt him. I was fond of him,' Grouchy replied.

'Then don't think too much of this,' Benyon urged. 'Nine thousand—it is a lot, but it won't make such a great difference to you. And you admit you cannot blame him entirely.'

'Blame him!' cried Grouchy, springing from his seat and glaring at the mild Benyon. 'Blame him! My God! If you only knew what is passing in my mind.'

'Steady,' said Benyon. 'I knew it would be a shock at first. But think it over carefully. And don't forget I have your promise about your will.'

'I will not forget,' said Grouchy grimly. 'I will not alter it. If he survives me, he takes all I have.'

Pleased at being reassured on this point, and not expecting to win any further concession while Grouchy was so badly out of temper, Benyon changed the subject.

'How did you get that extraordinary scar on your forehead?' he asked suddenly.

'It was an accident,' Grouchy answered shortly. 'It happened while I was dead—in Hell.'

Benyon gave up. It was hopeless to try to converse with a man in this mood. He would have liked to ask Grouchy about his beard, which also looked strange—almost artificial. Some new dressing or pomade? And cut a trifle differently? . . . But it was no use asking questions if he could only anticipate a surly reply. He turned his gentle gaze from Grouchy's rigid face and, through the window, watched some cheerful mites playing in the road outside.

Presently the office-boy returned with a bundle of notes. Benyon handed them to Grouchy without comment.

'Be careful, Cormack,' he begged as Grouchy rose to go. 'Another severe shock might bring out beyond remedy the madness which taints Hubert's blood.'

'I will bear the point in mind,' said Grouchy grimly.

CHAPTER XII

THE CAMPAIGN OPENS IN A MORTUARY

As soon as he had left the offices of Messrs. Benyon, Benyon, Son & Blutt, Grouchy hurried to the Strand. There he bought himself a few necessaries and a small suitcase to pack them in, and then went on immediately to Victoria Station. He booked a ticket for Seaford, and, finding that a train was due to depart shortly for that destination, settled himself down in a corner seat of an empty first-class smoker, with a luncheon basket.

When the train moved away a little later, Grouchy still had the carriage to himself. As soon as it had left the station, he removed his false beard and moustache and stuffed them away in his bag. He kept them in case of need, though, now that they had served the purpose for which they were originally intended, he could see no further use for them; it was not likely that he would wish to appear again as Grouchy for a long time to come. Having cleaned his sticky chin as best he could, he gave his undivided attention to his lunch, and when that was finished, stowed the basket away under the seat and lay back. With knitted brows and a malicious smile playing on his clean-shaven lips, he set himself to work out the full details of his plan.

The shock Grouchy had received when Benyon had innocently disclosed the fact that Marr had been pressing for the exact sums that Stone had stated to be the agreed payment for his removal had left a deep impression. Until that moment, Grouchy had resolutely refused to allow himself to place any credence in the suspicions that he had felt, steadfastly excluding from his mind the thought that Hubert could have been guilty of such dreadful treachery. But when the sudden, terrible proof of Hubert's complicity had come, it had been so crushing in its effect that all human sympathy had vanished from Grouchy's heart at that moment. He was now relentless in his determination to exact a full revenge. He smiled sourly as he calculated the extent of suffering he would cause. Thinking of Violet Langton, he asked himself one question only: 'Is it enough?' The thought of Hubert brought only the accompanying hope that madness would not intervene to save him from the full realisation of the agony of expiation. The thought of Stone left Grouchy unable to conceive of torture sufficiently grotesque and terrible to meet his deserts.

In the early afternoon the train ran into Seaford, and Grouchy, with his plans worked out to the minutest detail, wasted no time in putting them into operation. At the station he made a few inquiries and then took a cab direct to the police-station in the Belvedere Road on the eastern outskirts of the town. There he asked at once to see the sergeant in charge.

'From the description,' he began without hesitation to the stout and sleepy man whom he inter-

viewed—' from the description published in the papers yesterday and the day before of a man whose body was found under the cliffs last Sunday, and from the name Henry Birkett, I think I can be of some assistance to you.'

' Yes, sir,' replied the sergeant; ' I hope so, too. Up to now we've been unable to find out anything at all; and I was beginning to wonder if any one would ever turn up who knew something about the old beggar. We don't have to keep 'em so long usually. Do you think you will be able to identify the body?'

' Very possibly. I had certainly better see it. And perhaps I had better keep what I have to say until I have seen it. After that, I hope to be able to give you some of the particulars you require, or at least information which will help you to obtain them.'

' Then we'll go to the mortuary right away, if you don't mind. But he's a bit crumpled, I warn you. We have no end of trouble with people sometimes in that way. Thought I'd warn you, in case. There's nothing in it really. And you don't look squeamish, begging your pardon.'

Grouchy was nauseated by the man's casual references to the condition of the body of old Vane, and nodded his acquiescence in silence.

' Suppose he used to be your gardener,' the sergeant went on, ' or something of that sort. He looked like an odd-job man or—'

' No,' said Grouchy, and so incisively that the voluble sergeant maintained a hostile silence during the remainder of the short walk.

The mortuary was a small, isolated building,

standing in the middle of a rough plot of unbuilt-on ground. In the center of the single room which constituted the building a body lay on a grey marble slab forming the top of a long narrow table, of which the sides were boxed in so as to form a long cupboard underneath. 'A receptacle for further bodies,' Grouchy thought.

The sergeant stepped up to the body and casually swept off the white sheet which lay softly over it.

'There you are,' he said gruffly. 'Come closer. Don't be afraid of it. Recognise the old chap?'

Grouchy took one glance, shuddered at the sight of the crude, unnatural angles in which *rigor mortis* had set the broken limbs, and turned away. He went to the side of the room, and flung open one of the small lattice windows to let in some of the fresh sea-air. For some minutes he stood there drinking it in, and gazing blankly over the surrounding plot of derelict ground. But presently he appeared to be refreshed, for he pulled the windows to and turned again to look at the body.

It was undoubtedly Vane—the Vane he had known during his imprisonment. Face to face with the mortal remains of his old friend, Grouchy found it hard to play the unconcerned part that he had set himself. He could not trust himself to talk dispassionately in the presence of Stone's ghastly work, but he managed to conceal the break in his voice as he remarked:

'To be sure, it's very like. But I am not certain even now. We'll go back to the police-station and I'll tell you there what I suspect.'

The sergeant replaced the sheet over the body and led the way back.

When they were once again in the cleaner air of the police-station, Grouchy began to talk.

'I do not like to speak definitely,' he said, 'but at least I think I can give you a certain amount of information. You will be able to act upon it, and it will in all probability lead you to the more definite information you require. But first of all I will give you my name. You'd better make a note of these facts. My name is John Stone.' He paused while the sergeant wrote down the name. When the latter looked up at him again, waiting for more information, he ostentatiously fixed in his eye the monocle which Stone had, the night before, slung round his neck, and lightly passed the tips of his fingers backwards and forwards across the scar that gleamed high up upon his forehead as though brushing away a slight irritation. The sergeant's eyes followed the movements. When Grouchy was satisfied that he had attracted the man's attention to the salient features of a physiognomy in its main essentials not unlike that of the real John Stone, he resumed his story.

'I came down here on behalf of the Honourable Mrs. Langton—Mrs. Thomas Langton, of 43 Brunswick Gardens, Sloane Square.' The sergeant busily took it all down. 'At the present moment she is abroad, but she is returning immediately; we expect her back to-morrow. But in the meantime, in case there was any danger of your burying the body before she arrived and had had an opportunity of seeing it, we thought it better that I should come down here to see if there was any

foundation for our suspicions. And from what I have seen myself, I think I can speak with moderate certainty, but Mrs. Langton is the only person who can speak with absolute finality. Frankly, I believe the dead man to be her stepfather—'

'Her stepfather! What next, I wonder?' cried the sergeant, angrily throwing down his pen. 'You saw for yourself that this is an old labourer. I don't know who the '—the sergeant nearly said 'hell,' but changed it to 'honourable' just in time —'the Honourable Mrs. Langton is, but still surely— A joke's all very well in its place, but—'

Grouchy was intensely relieved to hear the sergeant disclaim all knowledge of Mrs. Langton. He was playing a dangerous game and so far had played it with success; but he had a more difficult fence to negotiate in a minute. He went on hurriedly, giving the sergeant no time for reflection.

'I am not joking,' he said testily. 'Either take down these particulars or I will waste no further time here but go straight to your superiors.'

The sergeant thought better of it and gathered up his pen again.

'Her stepfather,' Grouchy resumed, 'was an eccentric man. He was in the habit of going away alone for months at a stretch, touring the country in shabby costume, just like this man you miscall "Henry Birkett." The unfortunate mania took the form of a belief that to get to know the people you had to mix with them as one of themselves—though why he should want to know them passes my comprehension.' He glared offensively at the sergeant. 'But the fact remains. He travelled

under all sorts of odd names; Henry Birkett might well have been one of them. And the tattoo marks on his arm might very easily have been adopted by him to lend colour to his disguise. He was quite crazy in this one respect; but otherwise he was sane and at all times so perfectly harmless that it was impossible to put a check on his activities. The face of the body leaves me in no doubt that it is he; but, as I have said, I cannot speak definitely; I did not know him particularly well. Mrs. Langton will have to establish the accuracy of this statement. You will have to communicate with her at the address I have given.'

The sergeant, though taking no pains to conceal his doubts, had nevertheless, after Grouchy's threat, gone on with his notes assiduously. When Grouchy had finished his statement, he began to run through them.

'Let's see,' he said. 'Your name's Mr. John Stone. Of what address?'

'The same address as Mrs. Langton will do.'

'And she's the Honourable Mrs. Langton, of 43 Brunswick Gardens, Sloane Square. Is that right?'

'Yes.'

'And he—the old dead 'un—'is name would be Langton too, then. What were his Christian names?'

'Meyrick.'

'Meyrick Langton,' said the sergeant slowly. 'Never heard that name, neither, I don't think.'

'Probably not,' said Grouchy quickly. 'He was always a recluse. But that's all I can tell you. I shall stay the night in Seaford, and probably

call in here to-morrow morning in case you will have thought by then of any further questions you want to put to me. Meanwhile, send in your report to Headquarters. I myself will communicate with Mrs. Langton immediately she returns, and, doubtless, so will the police.'

'Very well, sir, thank you. I'll send in a report. Good-day.'

Grouchy rose to go, but at the door he turned back.

'How stupid of me!' he said. 'I should have corrected you before. I told you the dead man was Mrs. Langton's stepfather; so there are two reasons why his surname would not also be Langton, as you assumed. It was not. It was Vane.'

'Vane—Meyrick Vane,' said the sergeant, scratching his head and endeavouring to induce a little memory into it. 'Meyrick Vane. Sounds familiar, somehow, that does.'

'Good-day,' said Grouchy, and he hurried from the building.

'Meyrick Vane—Meyrick Vane,' repeated the sergeant as he settled himself down again to his interrupted afternoon nap. But suddenly he sat up stiffly. 'No—yes—of course!' he cried. 'I've got it. Meyrick Vane—that was it! I remember. But this is all damn silly—killed ages ago, he was! Thought I was being hoaxed all along.' And he bundled himself out of the police-station as speedily as he could and looked up and down the street for his departed informant. But Grouchy had not dallied on his way; by now he was a long way down a side street and still hurrying on.

'Suspected something of the kind all along,' murmured the sergeant as he wrote out his report. 'This man Stone will find himself in trouble shortly. Serve him right. Men who come spinning yarns like this and wasting the time of the police deserve all they get—and it won't be my fault if he doesn't get it in the neck!'

From the police-station Grouchy walked quickly back in the direction of the mortuary, then up and down the roads in its immediate vicinity, searching the ground-floor windows of the small villas as he passed along. Presently he stopped before one that had a notice 'Furnished Apartments' showing in the small light above the front door. Here he knocked and asked the old woman who opened the door to show him the rooms she had to let. Having inspected the dingy bedroom and sitting-room offered, he engaged them for the night. He told the landlady that she might expect some luggage shortly, which, when it arrived, was to be placed in the sitting-room; and leaving his small suitcase there, he went out again.

Making a wide détour, to avoid passing close to the Belvedere Road police-station, where, he had no doubt, the sergeant by now would be only too glad to see him again, Grouchy walked down to the shopping quarter of the town near the sea-front. At the first large greengrocer's he came to, he stopped and, entering, made a curious purchase. He ordered a hundred and fifty pounds of potatoes, directed them to be tied up tightly in a sack and then carefully packed round with straw in the largest packing-case the shop-keeper could pro-

vide, and to be delivered to him at his apartments immediately.

As Grouchy left the shop, a string of rabbits, hanging outside the window, assaulted his nostrils. He gazed at them attentively for a moment as though they were a strange, uncommon sight, then, smiling faintly, he stepped back into the shop.

'Put a couple of those rabbits into the box as well,' he ordered.

'I am sorry, sir, I can't very well sell you them,' the greengrocer's wife, who served him, replied. 'They're not too nice. I meant to have taken them down before.'

'You mean they are no longer fresh? No, I noticed that. That's what called my attention to them. But you're selling them cheap, I expect, and they'll do excellently for my cats. And, by the way, put them inside the sack with the potatoes, and leave the pelts on.'

The greengrocer's wife protested that she was not accustomed to sell goods that were not in perfect condition; still less, to packing high rabbits with perfectly sound potatoes. But Grouchy waived her objections aside, and eventually she consented to do as she was bid. 'Whoever heard of such a thing?' she asked herself as she faithfully carried out his instructions. Good potatoes packed up like that with stinking rabbits! The man must be an idiot! But he had paid for what he had had and seemed to know his own mind, so it was not for her to complain. His poor cats would have a bad time, but that was his look-out. In less than half an hour the packing-case, with its unsavoury contents, was duly delivered at Grouchy's lodg-

ings, and deposited, under his direction and despite his landlady's loud lament that her seedy drugget would be ruined, upon the mat in the middle of the sitting-room.

Grouchy dined slowly that evening in a passable hotel he found near the sea-front. He was grimly satisfied with the very considerable progress he had already made in weaving his web of revenge. Indeed, it was difficult to believe that it was still within twenty-four hours of that dreadful moment when, under the influence of Stone's anæsthetic, he had lost consciousness beside the river-bank. But now, sitting quietly at dinner, he began to feel the effect of the strain and excitement of the long day, and an urgent longing for sleep. He had been living on his nerves. Sheer physical exhaustion was setting in apace. It required a great effort to keep awake. But he still had one more all-important task to accomplish before he could relax that night; and it was a task which would require all his wits and courage. He sat over dinner as long as he could, knowing that he would not be allowed to sleep there. Eventually, the last to leave the restaurant, he rose and went slowly home to his lodgings.

Back in his sitting-room, Grouchy stared vacantly at the great packing-case lying in the middle of the floor. Presently, kneeling down beside it, he wrote, in large block letters with the butt end of a penholder upon the soft white wood of the lid, the name and address of Mrs. Langton. When he had completed that small task, he wrote a short note and enclosed it in an envelope upon

which he wrote: ' Particulars of contents hereof. To be delivered to Mrs. Langton in person.' This note he tacked lightly to the lid of the packing-case beneath the large-written address. Then he stood back and contemplated his handiwork with a smile of evil satisfaction. But in a moment, remembering again how tired he was, he yawned deeply and looked longingly at a terrible easy-chair with typical lodging-house bulges in its seat. But evidently deciding that even that was too risky, might induce sleep in his present exhausted condition, he turned his back upon it, and, with grim determination to remain awake, paced to and fro across the room.

At a late hour, when the few intermittent sounds of life outside had ceased and all but the few destitute inhabitants of the town had long since retired to their beds, Grouchy ceased his sleep-resisting parade. Then, as though bent on disturbing everyone else's rest besides his own, he stamped noisily out of the house, banging the front door loudly behind him. But when he was out in the street he changed his tactics and seemed desirous of avoiding rather than of attracting notice. He walked silently along the roads until he came to the low fence that surrounded the rough plot of ground in which stood the mortuary. With many a wary sidelong glance he crept along the fence until he reached a spot upon which the few widely spaced street-lamps shed only a faint glimmer of light. Here, glancing up and down, to assure himself that no one was coming along the road, he clambered swiftly over. For a moment he crouched down on the far side of the fence, lis-

tening intently for any sound to break the perfect quiet, then, hearing none, he stole silently across the intervening ground to the mortuary. Only a dim shadow now, he moved along the side of the small building, halting when he reached the centre window on the west side, that window which, when he had visited the mortuary during the afternoon, he had opened—ostensibly to let in the fresh sea-breeze. But he had deliberately failed to latch it when he had closed it, and now it yielded to his gentle pull. He swung it wide open, and, jumping on to the window-sill, slung his legs over and dropped lightly to the floor inside.

For a long while Grouchy stood where he had landed, still as death, as though forgetful of the reason of his midnight visit. His eyes were fixed on the sight before him. In the centre of the room lay the body on the marble slab. Through a small skylight in the roof above, the moonlight fell in a square patch upon the white sheet that lay softly over it. Where the sheet covered the dead man's face the moon lit up a mock and ghastly profile against the dark background of the walls. Grouchy had to fight hard to master his repugnance and summon sufficient courage to approach that cold and awful thing. 'Stone's work,' he thought. Death such as this was the logical and inevitable conclusion of the villainy of Stone and the rapacity of others. The thought gave him strength. With sudden decision, he moved forward and, bending down beside the boxlike table upon which the body lay, opened wide the door of the long cupboard beneath the marble top. Then, drawing off the white shroud, he gently

lifted the cold, stiff body of old Vane from the marble slab and laid it in the cupboard underneath.

'Rest there awhile, old man,' he murmured as he closed the doors upon the broken corpse. 'It will not be for long.'

He turned away, and, dragging the white sheet after him, let it fall in a tumbled heap close under the open window. Then he climbed out, and, leaving the window to swing and flap at will in the gentle breeze, cautiously stole back in the direction he had come and climbed over the fence into the deserted road again.

As he turned the first corner, about fifty yards along the road on his way back to his lodgings, Grouchy came suddenly upon a policeman. The latter was standing under a lamp, peering indecisively about him, trying to penetrate the surrounding darkness in an effort to see something that had evidently attracted his attention. Grouchy wondered whether he had been heard climbing over the fence. But he marched boldly on and gave the policeman a 'Good-night, Constable,' as he passed.

'Excuse me, sir,' said the policeman, stepping forward. 'Did you hear that noise along the way you've come from?'

Grouchy halted. He was about to ask weakly: 'What noise?' when the policeman spoke again.

'Listen! There! There it is again!'

Grouchy heaved a sigh of relief. He knew what that noise was well enough; it was caused by the spasmodic clanging of the window he had just left open. Each time it banged, the policeman turned

and looked in a new direction, unable to decide from which direction the noise was proceeding.

'Oh, that,' said Grouchy; 'yes, I heard it once as I came along. I think it comes from over there.' He pointed in the direction of the mortuary.

'Thank you, sir. It's odd. I thought it was coming from there myself—but it can't.'

'Oh, why not?'

'Why, because that's not a house. There's only a mortuary in there.'

'I see,' said Grouchy sarcastically. 'Clever deduction: mortuaries don't have windows. Most astute!'

The policeman felt foolish and moved away, muttering gruffly: 'You know what I meant. Them windows are never opened.' No, it couldn't be the mortuary, the policeman was sure. Besides, he had been about that corner for an hour or more and he hadn't heard that noise until the last few minutes. One of the windows in the mortuary couldn't have just been opened. Still, he had better go and make certain.

Grouchy went straight back to his lodgings. His day's work was nearly done; only one little task remained. He went into the sitting-room and there, for some deep and unintelligible reason and at the expense of the straightness of the lodging fire-irons, pried the lid of the great packing-case half open. His action seemed even more purposeless when, as soon as the nails that secured the lid had squeaked their way half out of their beds, he drove them home again with violent attendant hammering. The deafening noise brought down the landlady from her disturbed

rest. In a state of the greatest trepidation, she came downstairs to discover the cause of the commotion. Grouchy apologised. He assured her that his packing was now complete, and she would be disturbed no more. She retired and, shortly after, he too went to bed.

'The first stage accomplished,' he muttered as he snuggled down between the sheets. 'The money you gave me, Stone, the name, the appearance you gave me, the tale you told me, each and all are becoming active aids in the destruction of you and your accomplices. And many people unwittingly, but eagerly, are beginning to swarm upon your tracks. And the body, even the body that was to lie quietly in its public grave, that, too, will soon be crying: "Murderers!" I am ready for you, Violet Langton. Look out for yourselves, all of you. Each of you at the appointed time—'

But Grouchy was too exhausted. Not even the damp sheets nor the musty odour of the room could keep him any longer awake. He turned over onto his side and slept.

CHAPTER XIII

RECONNAISSANCE

The following morning Grouchy rose early. Hurriedly putting his few possessions together, he stowed them away in his little bag. He breakfasted quickly, then proceeded to the railway-station, travelling thither in an ancient growler, upon the top of which, rocking dangerously to and fro and in constant and imminent jeopardy of being jolted off and bursting forth its odd contents in the middle of the road, travelled the enormous and cumbersome packing-case. At the station, after a protracted and heated argument with the railway officials and by dint of paying many supercharges, he at length persuaded them to accept the packing-case for express delivery by passenger train to the address written upon its top. He also managed to persuade them, by registering and insuring it at further considerable expense and saying that it contained goods of some value, to require Mrs. Langton's personal signature as an acknowledgment of its due delivery. And lastly, by dint of constant repetition, he impressed upon the officials the perishable but undisclosed nature of the contents of the case, and secured their promise that the package would, without fail, be delivered before nightfall on that very day. He felt

extremely sceptical of the due performance of the majority of these glib promises; he knew the railways and their ways. But he avoided the open expression of his doubts, thinking it wiser to flatter by appearing to accept, without question, their protestations of infallibility, and ingratiate himself by tipping heavily all those who appeared to be influential in the matter. He left it at that, hoping for the best.

It was still quite early in the morning when he left the railway-station, and, having some hours to while away before his next engagement, he walked down to the shore and chartered a small sailing-boat, meaning to spend the rest of the morning amusing himself on the sea. But the sea was calm, the boat both heavy and slow; she would not respond to the fresh breeze with the alacrity he loved in his own speedy yacht. Moreover the dull-witted man from whom the boat had been hired had insisted upon accompanying Grouchy on the sail, and, to the latter's furious indignation, upon managing the craft himself. Grouchy was soon bored. After an hour he could bear it no longer and ordered the sailor to run along the intervening mile of coast to the port of Newhaven and land him there. And there, Grouchy paid him off and went ashore.

Though he had not intended to arrive at Newhaven so early, it had all along been his intention to come there later in the day; for he meant to meet the afternoon Channel steamer when she arrived from Dieppe, and watch for Violet Langton's return. Not that he was at all anxious to see her; he knew all he wanted to know of her, and

he had already made his arrangements for her reception. But he went to meet her, hoping to use her as a bait to catch another fish. Stone, he reckoned, would in all probability communicate with her, either immediately on her arrival at Newhaven or shortly afterwards at Victoria, to warn her of the danger that was awaiting her as the result of his prisoner's escape. Grouchy hoped that, by watching her, he would be able to detect Stone or his messenger and through him discover the present whereabouts of Stone and his gang, information which would be indispensable later on when he had finished playing cat-and-mouse with Violet Langton and Hubert Marr, and was ready to concentrate his attention exclusively upon the arch-devil of the three.

The afternoon boat was not due into port for some hours. Grouchy strolled leisurely into Newhaven town, lunched, and was back on the quay waiting for her arrival when she was still only a black dot on the horizon. He sat down on a great ship's timber lying on the point of the jetty and watched her slow approach.

If Violet Langton was returning from Dieppe that day, as the papers had stated, Grouchy thought, it was moderately certain that she would travel by the daytime boat. He hoped so; his plans were timed upon that assumption. And, as he sat there, waiting, he contemplated with grim satisfaction, the terrible blow that he was preparing to deal her. Little could she guess what horror lay in store for her. She would feel the weight of his merciless revenge. She had not considered the agony of old Vane; nor would he consider her

feelings or the righteousness of his manner of dealing with her. He contemplated with absolute equanimity the torture she would endure. She deserved it; nothing more nor less. She would suffer as Vane had suffered. He smiled sourly as he pictured the wild, frantic, but fruitless efforts she would make to cover up the clues to her villainy which he intended gradually to reveal. Yes, he would reveal them slowly. The agony of fear, that terrible, unendurable suspense, would be the chief part of her penalty. He would focus public attention upon her, then drop a hint here, a hint there that there was more behind his seemingly meaningless acts than appeared on the surface. Later he would drop a broader hint, and then another, little by little, until at last, maddened by fear of complete exposure, she would take a false step in her wild efforts to protect herself and give herself utterly away. The law could then impose its penalties upon the shattered wreck that remained. So with the others! Hubert Marr should follow and suffer in the same degree. Stone also! But of him Grouchy would leave nothing to be dealt with ultimately by the law. He would kill Stone, kill him himself. Stone had tortured and killed out of hand, so should he be dealt with. . . .

One thought only disconcerted Grouchy, as he reviewed these matters in his mind. There was a doubt as to the courage of Stone. Perhaps Stone was only a murderous bully, courageous enough to be abysmally brutal only when he was on top. But would he remain to fight when once he saw the game was up? Would he watch Grouchy

slowly working out his revenge upon him and his associates, and wait in the vain hope that his own turn might suddenly come? It was possible that Stone would fly the country and sink himself into the background of some obscure corner of the globe where it might be difficult, perhaps impossible, to find him and dig him out. Grouchy thought not, hoped not. Stone was an intrepid villain without doubt. He would almost certainly remain, a little while at least, seeking while there was still time to save himself by a surer method than by flight, seeking to secure Grouchy's silence by his death. Grouchy smiled. Herein lay half the beauty of the plan he had conceived. He had not gone bluntly to the police and told them all he knew: he was bearing the brunt of the struggle upon his own shoulders, so that he might achieve the personal and unlawful revenge upon which he had set his heart. Such revenge was more adequate than the paltry retributory punishment of the law; the law could have his leavings. Whilst acting in this manner, keeping the truth hidden from the public eye, it would be impossible for Stone at any given moment, until the final cataclysm burst upon him, to say that it was then too late to save himself by a swift stab or sudden shot at his accuser. Grouchy's actions would be pregnant with meaning only to his victims, they who already knew the whole story. To every one else the coming events might be intriguing, but they would remain obscure in their meaning until such time as Grouchy chose to raise the veil or his victims themselves threw in their hands. True, the police were going to play a part and so would many others; but

Grouchy would keep them all at arm's length. They would only work round the fringe of the mystery, be puzzled, interested, perhaps suspicious, but no more. They would never guess at the existence of the real tragedies that lay behind the strange pantomime that would be performed before their eyes until such time as, one by one, Grouchy's victims took that false step from which there would be no turning back, that fatal step by which they would condemn themselves. Yes, Stone would wait. And when the game was nearly up, Grouchy would strike swiftly at him before he had time to fly. Until that time Grouchy would maintain the position, nicely balancing doubt and fear, so that Stone would always hope that he might yet retrieve his position by stifling the condemning voice. . . .

Grouchy was suddenly awakened from his awful reverie to the realisation that the boat he had been following with his eyes was now passing between the two projecting jaws of the harbour's mouth. He shifted his position, moving down the quay to a spot sheltered from view by a mound of bales and merchandise, whence he could see all that happened, without being himself so easily seen. As the boat drew closer and, a little later, drew herself in to the side of the quay, Grouchy searched for Violet Langton amongst the passengers that lined the vessel's deck. At first he could not see her. But his watchfulness was soon rewarded, for, accompanied by a tired-looking woman in a drab grey costume who, judging by the way she bustled about and looked after the luggage, was apparently her maid, Violet Langton

was one of the first passengers to descend the gangway. Grouchy followed the two women into the Customs House, watching every action they took, and closely scanning all who came near them. Violet Langton herself he studied carefully and coldly, sizing up from her appearance how long she would hold out against his meditated assault. Not very long, he thought. Not very long. . . .

He had recognised her easily. But she had changed much since those few occasions upon which he had met her some years before. Her history had left an enduring mark deeply traced upon the expression of her face. His recollection of her was of a young and naturally beautiful woman. Though still young, her beauty now had more suggestion of artifice than of old, and she had acquired an expression which, though not exactly showing she was no longer young, yet seemed in some strange way incongruous with the obvious youth of her physique. Her mouth was firmer and its expression harder, as though she held her lips intentionally tight-closed. 'In perpetual dread of the escape of some casual remark she might afterwards regret,' thought Grouchy. Her eyes were restless, but here again not with the excited energy of youth. They looked from place to place, as if in constant search for something they could never find; they never rested upon any object in normal, interested observation. They would flash suddenly and a little defiantly at the face of some unsuspecting fellow-being near her as though expecting to surprise some look of recognition, or suspicion perhaps; but, finding

none, would droop a moment and then renew their unwearying search elsewhere. Grouchy found himself vaguely wondering whether she had had this strained look before Stone had told her that Meyrick Vane was dead, whilst she could yet avoid calling herself a murderess. For a moment her wandering eyes fell full on Grouchy. But he was prepared for their sudden onslaught. They saw only a complete stranger, whose watchful eyes were hidden beneath his deep-rimmed hat and who was blowing his nose into a particularly voluminous pocket-handkerchief. Her eyes fell for a second, and then flickered on elsewhere. 'You should have looked more carefully,' thought Grouchy when the fitful glance had left him. 'Soon you will wish to have me within your reach to strike me dead! If you could only read my thoughts, you would turn back now before it is too late! . . .'

He watched Violet Langton closely until she had passed through the Customs and settled herself in the boat-train, her maid in a a third-class compartment a few doors away. Then he found a corner-seat for himself in the carriage next door to Violet Langton's. Presently, the train began its journey. So far, Grouchy was certain, no one had been in communication with the woman since her arrival. It remained now to be seen whether Victoria would be chosen by Stone as the venue for imparting to her the news of her great danger.

When the train drew up in Victoria Station a little over an hour later, Grouchy, dallying in the obscurity of his carriage, watched Violet Langton

get out and despatch the maid who came hurrying up to her to collect the luggage from the van and have it placed on a cab, while she herself stood guard over a few small bags she had kept with her. Just as he was beginning to think that his watchfulness was proving fruitless and that he would have to try some other method of discovering the hiding-place of Stone, a lean, elderly man went hurrying past his carriage along the platform. The man clumsily bumped into Violet Langton, knocking an umbrella from her hand. 'Too clumsily,' thought Grouchy swiftly. The man stooped to pick the umbrella up, turned with a murmured apology to restore it to its owner, then hurried on. It was all done in a flash, but Grouchy could have sworn that he saw the man pass a small slip of paper to Violet Langton together with the umbrella. And, beyond doubt, he did see Violet Langton open her purse directly afterwards and slip some small white object inside. Suspicious! But there was something more which clinched the matter finally and banished all doubt from Grouchy's mind. He leapt out of the carriage and ran after the fast-receding figure of the man. In that brief second when the man had turned to hand back the fallen umbrella to Violet Langton, Grouchy had caught a glimpse of the clumsy fellow's face and recognised the bloodshot eyes and common features of Stone's henchman, Snobbit.

Jostling his way through the crowd, Grouchy was just in time to see Snobbit jump on to a moving bus in Grosvenor Gardens. Himself hailing a taxi, he ordered the driver to follow close

behind the bus and draw up when he tapped the window behind the driver's ear.

Half-way up Baker Street the bus in front stopped. Snobbit alighted. Grouchy rattled excitedly upon the window in front of him. The taxi drew in to the curb. When Snobbit had passed over to the far side of the road, Grouchy leapt out, paid off the taxi, and followed.

Snobbit led Grouchy a short way back along Baker Street, then down a side-turning to the east. After turning one more corner, he disappeared into a dingy house a few doors up a road lined on either side with the drab, respectable dwellings that abound in that neighbourhood. Grouchy went no farther than the corner of the road. He counted how many houses away the one which Snobbit had entered was from the corner where he himself was standing. The sixth! Odd numbers on that side, beginning at number one. Number eleven, then. And the name of the road was Furnes Terrace. . . .

'Eleven Furnes Terrace,' murmured Grouchy, as he walked away, his face beaming with fierce delight. 'Oh! that fool Snobbit. Stone, you should have sacked him long ago. I shall know now where to find you when I am ready to kill.'

CHAPTER XIV

THE LOGIC OF POLICE AND PARLOURMAIDS

The parlourmaid at 43 Brunswick Gardens, the town house of the Langtons, had prepared some tea against Violet Langton's expected return. She carried it up to her in the drawing-room immediately she arrived.

Violet Langton sat fidgeting impatiently, waiting for the maid to complete her noiseless but prolonged evolutions with the tray. The moment the maid had gone, she plunged her hand into her bag and brought out the note which had been delivered to her on the platform at Victoria Station. At first she glanced at its contents casually, but suddenly she gasped; her expression grew tense and strained, and her eyes wandered furtively round the room as if fearing the presence of an eavesdropper. She read the note a second time, then, with a furious gesture, tore it into many pieces and, walking to the fire, dropped them into the midst of the flames and stood there watching them burn until the last fragment had been utterly consumed.

'The fool!' she hissed through her clenched teeth. 'The fool!—the beast!' She pursed her lips so tightly that they whitened under the unnatural pressure. So that was why she had been

communicated with so urgently! Stone had bungled, had let some man escape! And she had to be on her guard. The fool! Her eyes blazed furiously. Then, as if she had found some sudden comfort, her face relaxed, she shrugged her shoulders and went back to the sofa. How could it matter to her if some one had escaped? She had finished her business with Stone long ago. For over a year now the counterfeit Meyrick Vane had lain quietly in his grave. And Stone had told her that the real Meyrick Vane had died in captivity some little time ago. True, it might be that Stone had induced that second death. He probably had. Such action had not been part of the original bargain; it had, in fact, been expressly excluded. But perhaps it had been the best thing that could have happened. And, anyway, whether it had been natural or not, it had not been her doing; and what was infinitely more important, it had passed off quietly. No, it couldn't be that. Even if Stone had murdered the real Meyrick Vane, that body, too, had been got rid of successfully. It couldn't be that. Stone had said that Meyrick Vane, real or false, had been finished with forever, without the possibility of any question ever arising. So far as she was concerned, the whole business was finished with—unless any of it came to light now. And Stone did not suggest it had. How could it? How could she be affected by the escape of some other of Stone's victims? No, this was his affair. He had got panicky; she need not worry.... She stretched her hand towards the teapot.... She need not worry. The man who had escaped was

part of another story; he could know nothing of her history—unless—unless Stone had been talking too much! But it was not possible that he could have blundered to that extent.... She raised the teapot.... Then, why had he taken the trouble to warn her of danger? Great danger that was imminent, great danger to her! ... She lowered the teapot again, swiftly.... Why? Stone was a talker. She had heard him, in his over-confidence, say things that would spell death if anything went wrong. A man had escaped! What man? Great danger! The monstrous beast! There was no other explanation. Stone must have given her away. She who had played her part well and fully long ago, who had done all and more than had been demanded of her, she was to be dragged back into that hell again because Stone had talked. Was that it? Dragged back once it was all over! The Vane business had been finished and done with satisfactorily once. Was it to begin again now? Some one suspected, some one knew! No one could, unless Stone had put them on the track. If Stone had not given her away, there could be no danger now. But he said there was—great danger! It was clear; Stone had made some hideous mistake, and she was to be on her guard. In the end, she might have to pay for his mistake. . . .

The note had said nothing more. She was not told what to expect or whence the danger might come, who the man was or how much he knew; nothing, except that a man had escaped and there was danger. She cursed Stone furiously under her breath. She had no regrets for what

she had done; but the thought that she might now have to pay the penalty for Stone's weak muddling drove her wild with anger. Her eyes flashed. She had employed Stone only because the job in hand had been too great for her to do alone. And, already, she had pulled him out of one tight corner which he had not foreseen—when the scar had been discovered on the thigh of the counterfeit body. Now he had made another mistake, and this time a crowning, perhaps a fatal mistake. She would have to struggle again to cover it, to cover his mistake. The blundering fool! How dared he drag her back again! . . .

Violet Langton's livid passion left little room for fear, little room for anything but a sense of absolute outrage. But she realised that immediate action was necessary if Stone's note had told the truth. She would go to Stone at the address he had given—11 Furnes Terrace—and find out how matters stood. She sat, with eyes flaming, glaring round her.

Presently the maid entered the room to remove the tea-tray. But the tea had as yet been untouched. Noticing this and also her mistress sitting rigidly beside it with flashing eyes, the maid hastily retreated. But at the door, remembering an important message which she had forgotten to deliver, she turned to speak. She restrained a smile with difficulty, enjoying the unusual opportunity of startling her mistress in return for the many times she herself had been startled by just such a storm of impetuous anger as she suspected to be brewing at this moment. She spoke slowly to prolong the delightful sensa-

tion, opening with a tentative: 'Excuse me, madam.'

'Well?' said Violet Langton, darting a glance at her.

'I have a message for you. You were called for early this afternoon—by the police, madam.'

Violet Langton was unable to quell a sudden frightened movement as she heard the words. Things were moving quickly! She looked fiercely and defiantly at the maid, searching her face for a suggestion of suspicion. What did she know? The features of the maid remained impassive; she was accustomed to being glared at in this manner; she thought nothing of it. But she had caught sight of Violet Langton's nervous movement, and was delighted with that visible effect of her words. Never before had she been able to strike the first blow in these swift storms. She stood now silently, waiting to be questioned, relishing the sweet amusement of each moment, and knowing well that her mistress's impatience would not allow her to leave the matter there.

'Well?' asked Violet Langton savagely, after a long pause.

'There's nothing else,' said the maid infuriatingly, and slowly turned to go.

'Come back! How dare you leave when I am speaking!'

'What more does madam want?'

'What did you say to them?'

'Oh, I just told them when you would be back and they said they would call round again later.'

Violet Langton tried to speak unconcernedly as she asked:

'I see. Do you know what they want?'

'They only said that they wanted to see you, personally, on very important business. They would leave no message. They were very secretive.'

The maid's answer was strictly true; she had not the remotest idea what the police wanted. She wished she had. She had tried hard enough to find out. But, not knowing, she tried to make her answer sound as ominous as possible in the hope that she would be questioned further. From the form of the questions that were put to her, she might gain some insight into what was passing in her mistress's mind and see if her mistress suspected anything. She was deeply disappointed when Violet Langton merely said:

'I am going out at once. Call a taxi. Tell me when it is here. And if the police come, say that I am out.'

After a few minutes the maid returned and announced that a taxi was waiting below. Violet Langton put on her coat and ran downstairs. But as she ran she heard a bell, and, when she reached the hall, the maid was opening the front door. She slipped quietly into a side-room off the hall to avoid being seen, and waited for the maid to send the inopportune caller away.

From the little morning-room where Violet Langton stood she heard herself asked for in a deep male voice, and the maid answer that Mrs. Langton could not see the visitor as she was just going out. Violet Langton stamped her foot with fury, and vowed that she would dismiss the maid for not saying plainly that she was 'out.' The

caller, whoever he was, on learning by inference that Mrs. Langton was in, became importunate. Presently, Violet heard his voice coming from well within the hall; presumably he had brushed past the maid and impertinently entered the house. He was now insisting that he must see Mrs. Langton at once as his business was urgent, too urgent to be delayed until Mrs. Langton returned; he had to make a report upon the interview to Headquarters immediately.

Violet cursed. It was obvious that the caller was some member of the police force come back to make inquiries. And she had no doubt that these inquiries had some connection with the warning she had received from Stone. Enraged by the incompetent maid, she was now more determined than ever that she would not brook this impertinence. She would not interview the policeman before she had seen Stone and learnt the exact nature of the danger she had to face.

The policeman in the hall was still refusing to be gainsaid, and the maid was weakening before his resolution. Violet Langton took the matter in her own hands. Coming out from her place of concealment, and taking no notice of the policeman—an inspector of police he was—but giving the maid a stony glare to quell her into silence, she marched boldly across the hall to the front door when the infuriating maid in her most naïve tone said:

'Excuse me, madam. This gentleman—' And the inspector, instantly realising from the maid's deferential manner who the lady hurrying past must be, took up the strain.

'Excuse me, madam,' he said. 'You are Mrs. Langton, I believe?'

'Yes,' said Violet Langton sharply and without checking her speed; 'but I can't possibly see you now. Call in an hour's time.' She had got as far as the top step outside the front door on her flight to the taxi.

'I must ask you to see me now,' said the inspector, following her down the steps. 'I'm sorry, but those are my instructions.'

'I cannot, I tell you. Call later.' Her hand was on the handle of the taxi door.

'I tell you, madam, that I must see you—and now.'

'And I tell you, I will not see you. The maid will make an appointment, if you desire.'

'If you're going far in the taxi,' the inspector persevered, 'I will come with you, if that would be more convenient. I can ask you the few questions I have to ask during the ride.' He was becoming as determined as Violet Langton herself.

Violet Langton stepped into the taxi without replying. She thought she had won the engagement.

'Drive to Baker Street Station,' she said to the driver. 'And close the door at once,' she added to the inspector, who stood hesitating on the pavement, his hand resting on the lowered window.

The inspector did as he was told, but not before he had himself entered the taxi and was seated deferentially on one of the uncomfortable seats, back to the driver, facing Violet Langton.

'This is the grossest impertinence!' Violet Langton burst out. 'Please get out immediately.'

'My instructions were precise,' said the inspector firmly. He was now thoroughly angry at the brusque treatment he had received. He wouldn't give in now; no, not if he got the sack for it. 'I was ordered to interview you immediately you returned, and I will. It is for you to choose whether it is in the house or in the taxi. Ten minutes will be enough.'

'This is impossible. An outrage. I shall report you.'

The inspector did not move.

Violet Langton bit her lip in impotent fury. It was enraging, humiliating. But she could not drive round the town in the company of an inspector of police; still less could she call on Stone in such company. There was no choice but to swallow her indignation and go back into the house. That maid would suffer for this, she thought. She stepped out of the taxi and marched haughtily back up the front steps, vowing revenge upon all concerned. The inspector followed, smiling broadly with satisfaction at his easy victory over this viper of a woman.

'Tell the taxi to wait,' Violet Langton ordered the maid peremptorily as she passed her by the door. When she was well within the hall she turned to the inspector and, in the most insulting voice she could command, asked: 'And now what do you want? Be quick, please!'

The inspector got out his notebook in leisurely fashion and spoke slowly. He was not going to

stand this insufferable treatment. He wouldn't hurry. The law was not made to study the convenience of women like this.

'I have been instructed,' he said, with long pauses between each word, 'to make some inquiries. There is a little matter in connection with which we may require your assistance. It concerns a report that has just reached us from Seaford. Let me see —' He consulted his notebook to learn what he already knew by heart; it took more time. 'Ah, yes. First of all, have you ever heard of a man called Henry Birkett?'

'Henry Birkett,' Violet Langton repeated. 'Henry Birkett? No. I have never heard the name before. Who is he? And what is he? How should I know him?'

'Thought you might not know the name. This is rather what we suspected.' And the inspector wrote down the answer in his notebook, reading aloud as he wrote. 'Has never heard the name.' He was spinning out the time beautifully.

'Is that all?' asked Violet Langton offensively.

'No, it is not,' the inspector drawled. 'Now I should like to know, do you know the name John Stone?'

Violet Langton was caught unprepared. A cold shiver ran down her back and for a moment she had difficulty in steadying herself. If the police knew the name of Stone, what might they not know? The policeman noted her agitation, but only flattered himself that his intentional dilatoriness had succeeded in infuriating the hateful woman beyond endurance.

'No,' said Violet Langton presently, not trusting herself to say more; and waited trembling for the next question.

'There again, you see, it is just as I expected,' the inspector commented, as he made another note. 'Answer: no. Very well. And now can you think of any one who would be likely to play a most unpleasant trick on you, any one who might slander you, any one who has a spite against you?' He smiled inwardly as he thought what hundreds of people there must be answering to that description, if this woman's temper was always as venomous as to-day.

Violet Langton shook her head. Things were beginning to look serious, and they were by no means clear. She would say nothing until she knew more. She waited anxiously for the inspector to go on.

'Answer again: no. Well, then, perhaps you know some one whom you might describe like this.' He read from his notebook. 'Height, about six foot; colour of hair, black; face, clean-shaven; complexion, pale; long, red, curling scar over left temple; wears monocle in left eye; fashionably dressed. Does that convey anything to you?'

Violet Langton held her breath. She could fit the description exactly! She pretended to make a mental search through the list of her acquaintances, then shook her head again.

'Can't place that either, eh?' said the inspector. 'I was wrong there; I thought you would probably recognise that. That scar sounds peculiar, an unmistakable-once-you've-seen-it kind of affair. Ought to be able to lay hands on him

pretty easily. Anyway, answer again: no. It's a funny business, this is.'

'Why should I know these people?' Violet Langton asked, in spite of herself unable to resist the temptation of trying to discover just how much the police knew, though it meant continuing this dangerous interview.

'Well, it's like this,' the inspector replied. 'A few days ago a man, an old workman called Henry Birkett, fell over the cliffs near Seaford and was killed. The police down there have been trying to discover where he came from, and whether he had any relations. And so on and so forth, before they buried him. Until yesterday, they hadn't been able to find out anything at all. Then, yesterday, along comes a man calling himself John Stone and answering to the description I just gave you—red scar on forehead, six foot, black hair, and so on—and goes into the police-station at Seaford East, saying that he had come on your behalf.' Violet Langton frowned. What on earth could that fool Stone have been playing at? 'He said he had come about the body of Henry Birkett, and span a long, ridiculous yarn about the body being that of your late stepfather, Mr. Meyrick Vane. He told them that you would give 'em all particulars.' Violet Langton had to grip her hands fiercely together to prevent herself betraying the emotions that were moving her. Stone had gone mad! Or turned King's evidence! Which? 'The sergeant in charge down there swallowed the whole story at first because he didn't happen to remember the name of Mr. Meyrick Vane or anything else

about him—they're a bit sleepy down at those seaside places. But he remembered all about the affair immediately after the so-called John Stone had left. Then he got busy; but it was too late. They couldn't trace this humbug who had been fooling them. As soon as we received the report of all this at Headquarters, we thought this man John Stone might probably be some one under a false name trying to play an ugly joke on you for some reason best known to himself. We remembered, of course, at once that Mr. Meyrick Vane had been killed accidentally a good time ago. We hoped you might help us; and I was ordered to come and see you directly you returned in the hope that you would be able to give us a hint as to who this John Stone might be, so that we could lay hands on him directly. But you say you can't, don't recognise the description; so we will have to follow up the clues we've got without your help. It doesn't matter much; that scar ought to be easy enough to find.'

Violet Langton listened with growing horror to the inspector's story. Stone must have gone raving mad! He himself had been creating the very danger that he had written to warn her of. Her sense of fury against him became so overwhelming that, momentarily forgetful of her perilous position, a savage oath all but burst involuntarily from her lips. But she checked herself in time. She thought feverishly. After a moment's silence she said:

'It must be some madman. I have not the remotest idea who he is nor what his object can be in making these outrageous statements. Of

course, you realise there is not a suggestion of truth in any of them. But I do not want the additional unpleasantness of publicity; this matter is already painful enough. So do nothing more; I have no intention of proceeding against this man even if you find him. Naturally, I shall be compelled to take action if the offences are repeated; but until then, you can let the matter drop.' The police must be stopped at all costs, she thought. And she would see that the offences were not repeated. As soon as she could get rid of the inspector she would go and see Stone. And she would silence him—somehow.

'Thank you, madam,' the inspector was saying. 'But we can't very well let the matter drop, as you suggest. If you were the only person concerned, if it was just a personal affair, so to speak, the chief might possibly respect your wishes. But it isn't; it's got beyond that. We've already wired to Seaford to tell them to strain every nerve to detain this man, without waiting to hear what you had got to say. You see, I haven't told you yet all that was in that report we received. There was a lot more. And what we want the man for, now, is connected with something that happened late last night, long after he had been to the police-station. It was another funny affair, which we, putting two and two together, strongly suspect that he had a hand in.'

'What was that?' asked Violet Langton in a strained voice, and prepared herself for another, perhaps even more, menacing revelation.

'The body of this old Henry Birkett was stolen from Seaford mortuary during the night.'

Violet Langton said nothing; there was nothing to say. She stood, pale and shivering, waiting for the inspector to continue.

'Yes, the body was stolen, and in the circumstances, obviously, we have connected this so-called John Stone with the crime—'

'Excuse me, madam,' interrupted a voice close behind Violet Langton, which made her jump violently. 'Excuse me, madam, would you sign this, please?' The maid advanced into the room from behind Violet Langton, holding a large dirty book open in one hand and the stub end of a pencil in the other.

'What is that?' Violet Langton asked, recovering from her momentary fright.

'A large packing-case has just arrived for you, madam—from Seaford.'

'Funny, just as we were talking about Seaford,' the inspector commented banally. But then, feeling that he had no business to be listening to a private conversation between maid and mistress, flushed deeply and, standing only a foot away from the speaker, stupidly pretended to hear no more.

'Take it away. Sign it yourself,' Violet Langton ordered angrily. 'You know very well these things are always signed for in the kitchen.' She would have said more; but what was the use? She had already determined to give that incompetent maid notice. She turned her back upon the maid. 'Go on, constable, with what you were saying.'

'I'm sorry, madam,' persevered the maid, 'but the man says he must have your own signature

for the goods; they're registered or something. And here is a note which was stuck on the top of the box which he says ought to be delivered to you at the same time, to see that the goods are all right.' She produced a grimy envelope, torn at each corner where it had been pulled away from its retaining nails.

Violet Langton gave in. She was not expecting anything from Seaford; but without further protest she scribbled her signature in the book. She would ask no more questions; such strange, unaccountable things were happening all round her that she was becoming apprehensive of everything. The answer to the most simple question might provide some unexpected shock from a new quarter. Her weakening powers of resistance and dissemblance could not sustain much more. She passed the book back to the maid, whisked the note out of the latter's hand, and tore it open. It contained a single sheet of notepaper, upon which there were but two lines of writing. She read them. There was a sudden catch in her breath, a little gasp, and the note fluttered from her hand, sailing lightly to the floor. Her face turned ashen-grey and her body swayed. The inspector stepped forward hurriedly to support her. The maid stooped to retrieve the fallen note. But Violet Langton, through her dazed senses, saw the maid's intention and, gathering all her strength, lurched forward and seized the note from beneath the latter's outstretched hand.

The maid was positively startled. Never before had she known her mistress bend to pick up anything from the floor when there was another

human creature within call who could do it for her. And not only had her mistress actually picked the note up, but done it eagerly, as though her life depended upon it! She looked with undisguised surprise at Violet Langton's strained face, and then, bending her head a little to one side, sought with burning curiosity to see what was written upon that slip of paper, crushed so fiercely in her mistress's hand. She was deeply disappointed; she could not see even one little word to make the subject of speculative discussion with Mrs. Lyndon Panks, the cook. She would have to make something up. . . .

The inspector, also, was surprised in a bovine way by Violet Langton's sudden access of agility. He still stood foolishly beside her, with one arm stretched out and firm, like a traffic signal, in which a moment ago he had expected to catch a fainting woman. . . .

Violet Langton looked from one to the other and noted surprise written plainly on each face. She wondered vaguely whether she had hopelessly betrayed herself, whether it was any use going on with this obvious play-acting. In a dull voice, and speaking as though she did not care whether they believed her or not, she explained:

'It was nothing; a little dizziness that went as quickly as it came. I have had an exhausting journey, you know. You were saying, constable—'

But the enraging maid interrupted again.

'Please, madam,' she said, 'Mrs. Lyndon Panks says shall she open the case as there's something in it that smells as if it's going off,

and it's marked "perishable"?' The cook, Mrs. Lyndon Panks as she liked to be called, but plain Mrs. Panks as to her undying indignation she had been called by each successive mistress, had said nothing of the kind. But the maid herself had noticed a curious odour clinging to the packing-case when it was being carried into the house, and now, after Violet Langton's strange behaviour with the covering note, was wildly curious to know what the packing-case contained.

Violet Langton shivered slightly, and her eyes again searched the faces of the maid and the inspector.

'No,' she answered jerkily. 'Tell Mrs. Panks not to touch it. Leave it exactly as it is. Tell her it's not to be opened. Put it in the cellar. I know what it contains.' She did know. The two short lines written in the note held crumpled in her hand were running through and through her mind. Over and over again she was repeating them to herself. She would recite them aloud in a minute, if she could not stop them going round and round in her head, recurring, like the tune produced by a cracked gramophone record. 'Herewith please receive dead body of Meyrick Vane, John Stone.' 'Herewith please receive dead body of Meyrick Vane, John Stone.' 'Herewith please receive—' She looked furtively at the inspector. Could he hear what was shouting in her brain? '—body of Meyrick Vane, John—' The whole world seemed to be tottering to its fall about her. She could bolster it up no longer. The cataclysm would come in a—'Stone. Herewith please receive dead body—'

The maid went away, not knowing what to make of it all. She had seen her mistress in many moods, chiefly bad-tempered, but never in one like this. It wasn't bad temper, exactly; it certainly wasn't good temper; it wasn't exhaustion, that was certain; it wasn't—she couldn't classify it at all. She wondered whether she could risk misunderstanding her mistress's orders and have that case opened. She would love to know what it was that smelt. She would tell Mrs. Lyndon Panks that madam had said—but no, it wasn't worth risking. The case was bound to be opened soon. . . .

'Yes, a funny coincidence,' Violet Langton said to the inspector when the maid had gone, and more to stop that voice in her head going round than with any hope of successfully carrying on the deception. 'When you mentioned Seaford, the name seemed quite unfamiliar. I had entirely forgotten that I was expecting some things from there. Now go on with what you were telling me.' She smiled a smile that no one but the inspector could have believed. But he questioned neither that nor the blood-red patch on her lower lip where her teeth had dug deeply into it, which showed clearly as her lips parted to speak. It never occurred to him to consider this woman anything other than a nervy and exceedingly evil-tempered creature. He put her strange behaviour down to those characteristics, combined with the exhaustion of her journey and the unpleasant nature of the tale he was telling. The story of the body at Seaford was, for him, fully and finally explained by his theory of the lunatic practical

joker, slanderer, and thief. Not seeking an alternative solution, naturally he did not find one. And, as for the coincidence of the packing-case coming from Seaford, he did not give it another thought.

'I think I had just told you,' he resumed, 'that the body of this Henry Birkett was stolen from the mortuary down at Seaford last night. In the circumstances, we suspect this man who's parading under the name of John Stone. He went to the mortuary during the afternoon to look at the body and, while he was there, pretending to feel a bit faint or something, he opened one of the windows. Now, it was through that same window that the thief got in during the night and took the body out. Those are the facts. You can probably guess our deductions. Our theory is, that his yarn was merely an excuse to go and see the body so that he could leave one of the windows of the mortuary improperly fastened while he was there, and then come back during the night, get in through the window he had prepared, and take the body away for whatever purpose he wants it for. But none of this subsequent affair, this theft of the body has anything to do with you. I'm just telling you to explain why we can't let the matter rest as you suggested. We want to find this body-snatcher and the body.'

'I see,' said Violet Langton slowly. Then, in the hope that if she could not stop the police investigations at least she might be kept informed of the result of such investigations and the construction that was put upon them, she added: 'Perhaps you will let me hear at once of every

fresh development. I am in the dark at present, but an explanation may occur to me when I know more; with the aid of a few more hints as to his identity I might even be able to help you trace the culprit.'

The inspector assured her that this would be done, that she would be notified from hour to hour of every fresh development, and went away.

When he had gone, Violet Langton sank into a chair. In her vile way she was a brave woman, but this ordeal had been an unendurable strain. Threatened with exposure on all sides, and with Stone acting as he was, she felt utterly helpless, defenceless. 'Herewith please receive dead body of—' She shuddered as the lines ran through her head again. She had always relied upon herself, upon her own wit and courage, to pull her through, forming her own plans and carrying them out with skill and grim determination. But now, with Stone disclosing her whole story, she was impotent. The feeling was new to her. 'Dead body of Meyrick Vane—' And it smelt! Even the cook had noticed it. Why had Stone sent it to her? She sat limp and shivering, her eyes restful and still for once, staring vacantly before her. . . .

Presently, the maid came to remind her that the taxi was still waiting. The driver was getting restive, she said, with six shillings registered already on his meter.

Violet Langton rose, saying that she would come at once. She might as well go and see Stone, even though it couldn't help. Matters were already far past redemption. But she would find out why he

sent that body. Her eyes flashed. Yes, he would have to answer that. And explain his other actions too. Perhaps—perhaps if he were silenced, even now she would still be able to find a way out. Perhaps it was not too late. . . .

With her lips set again in the old, hard, thin line, and her eyes once more wandering, searching, she went swiftly up to the drawing-room. Unlocking a small drawer in a bureau, she drew out a diminutive revolver that shone keenly in the light. It slid caressingly into the pocket of her coat. It comforted her. She walked firmly downstairs to the waiting taxi.

'Herewith please receive—' Yes, Stone should answer for that. . . .

CHAPTER XV

THE DISPOSAL OF THE CASE

GROUCHY sat long over his breakfast in the shabby room he had taken in one of those long, dreary streets that abound on the western fringe of Earl's Court. He sat reading the morning papers, of which, to the noticeable astonishment even of the weary-eyed woman who had let him the rooms, he had bought a comprehensive selection, trying to get a clear account of the facts that had been made public concerning his visit to Seaford and the events of the following day. Realising that his nefarious activities would at once arouse the interest of the police and later of the public, and anticipating a feverish search for the unknown person who had appeared at Belvedere Road police-station with such an absurd and scurrilous yarn, he had taken certain precautionary measures against his own discovery. He was now again wearing the false beard and moustache which he had bought to deceive Jim Benyon, and he had brushed his thick hair down over his forehead, thereby practically concealing the scar that flared high up on the very edge of his scalp. He had, for the same reason, tucked away in his waistcoat pocket the monocle and its guard which he had so ostentatiously used when aping the external char-

acteristics of Stone before the police sergeant at Seaford. He felt fairly confident that any description published by the police of the visitor to Seaford would hardly tally with his appearance now; and at any rate he was not likely to be caught out by the weary, unobservant eyes of the lean woman who made her poor living out of this one set of rooms. And she was the only person who mattered for the moment, as, except for completing his business later that morning with a certain young man who could scarcely as yet have had an opportunity for reading the morning papers, Grouchy intended to remain quietly in his rooms, out of observation's way, for some time to come. From there he would be able to watch the spark that he had fired flicker gently, then more brightly, and finally burst into a devouring sheet of flame. He would be able to nurse it, add fuel as occasion demanded, until Violet Langton, Hubert, and Stone were one by one tortured into self-incrimination by its intolerable heat.

The papers which Grouchy was reading showed him that events had marched more rapidly than he had anticipated. Newspaper reporters had been early on the warpath. In each of these journals considerable space and attention was devoted to his visit to Seaford, and in each was printed a description, closely following that given by the police inspector to Violet, of the man who had given his name as John Stone. In each case the description was accompanied by a brief account of the yarn the man had spun to the police, his visit to the mortuary, and the subsequent disappearance of the body. Violet Langton's disavowal of all

knowledge of the stranger and her indignant denial of the truth of his story were noticed in most cases, and sympathy was expressed for her as the victim of a most offensive and scandalous trick. The miscreant, his motive being so entirely obscure and his acts seemingly so irrational, was generally assumed to be a morbid maniac.

The assumption of insanity was to some extent borne out by a report of strange happenings in Oxfordshire, which had just found its way to the press. It had at first been flatly disbelieved, but now it found a place of honour beside the Seaford story, through its connection with the same John Stone.

This second report emanated, of course, from Professor Dudgeon. He had been far from inactive. As soon as he had found the short note signed John Stone, which Grouchy had left, he had rushed to the police to acquaint them with all the facts. Smarting under a deep sense of injury done him by the hasty and secret departure of his uninvited guest, whom, he flattered himself, he had saved not once but twice in a single night from a terrible death under circumstances requiring a positively monumental display of courage, he had told the police a very high-flown tale. He had been anticipating with radiant expectation the shower of compliments that would be bestowed upon him when he arrived at the local police-station with Grouchy in tow, and made public the terrific events of the preceding night. Also, Grouchy's disappearance had robbed him of the inestimable pleasure of presenting him to his friends as, ' The man I saved—twice in one night,

you know.' But going to the police-station as he did, alone and boiling with a mixture of pride and righteous indignation, was not without its compensating advantages. Though substantially following the truth and correct sequence of events, in Grouchy's absence he both could and did place all the facts in a light so extravagantly complimentary to himself and derogatory to John Stone, that beside himself the latter appeared, if not as a downright coward, at least as a nerve-ridden weakling. Professor Dudgeon had only himself to blame for the result of such misleading nonsense. He was too small a man to carry off so large a story. He simply was not believed. But now, the description and the name of the villain in both the Seaford and Oxfordshire reports being identical, the two stories were printed side by side. The papers vied with one another in speculating as to the character and exact nature of the madness of the extraordinary man who had perpetrated these two series of offences in places so far apart and within so short a space of time.

The obvious untruth and absurdity of Stone's story at Seaford had a further unhappy effect upon the construction that was now placed upon the Oxfordshire story. Professor Dudgeon was now believed to some extent, but his exaggeration still failed to serve the purpose for which it was intended. Instead of being hailed as the hero of the hour, he was made to look rather ridiculous; for though on the main points his veracity was unquestioned, his bravery and intelligence were utterly discredited. He had been another victim of this lunatic practical joker, the papers declared

in chorus. The men who had to all appearances been seeking the life of John Stone that night must have been either John Stone's assistants playing at being murderers, or warders from some local asylum seeking to recapture him. The truth would soon be known; but in either case, Professor Dudgeon had made an ass of himself. He had been easily bamboozled either into playing a mock-heroic part in an idiotic piece of tomfoolery or into aiding a wild lunatic to remain at large. Professor Dudgeon became the laughing-stock of the moment.

There was little else in the papers. Any one able to throw light upon the identity or hiding-place of John Stone was asked to come forward and lodge their information immediately with the police.

Grouchy was highly delighted. Everything was progressing exactly as he wished. The interest of the police and the curiosity of the public had both been roused, and both were as yet working completely in the dark, Violet Langton would be harassed by the knowledge that the police were investigating closely matters behind which lay secrets that deeply concerned her. She would be living in an agony of dreadful expectation. And by now she would have received the packing-case. If she had acted as Grouchy had anticipated, he would learn more about that directly. Then, he would be ready to deal her another deadly blow. She would not hold out for long against his onslaught. Soon, in panic-stricken fear, she would give away the damning secret that she was now vainly fighting to conceal.

And Hubert Marr? He, too, would be suffering the terrors of dreadful suspense. He would have seen the name John Stone figuring largely in the papers, and be wondering: what next? Stone would probably wait till the last moment to say anything to Marr; explanation would not be easy. For Stone still hoped to get three thousand pounds out of Marr. And Grouchy's continued detention was the *sine qua non* of that payment. Stone would have told Marr nothing yet. And Marr, knowing nothing but what he read in the papers, would be ignorant of what that meant, except that it implied great danger.

Reckoning upon the accuracy of his guess that Stone had as yet told Marr nothing, Grouchy had, the previous evening, taken a leap in the dark. He had written a long note to Hubert. It ran—as nearly in Stone's vein of language as Grouchy could manage—as follows:

'You and I, my dear Hubert, are in some danger of being disturbed in consequence of an unfortunate occurrence. One of my patients—not, thank Heaven, your dear uncle, for whom I have developed an abiding affection—has, unhappily, left me to seek other advice. As you may well imagine, this may lead to awkward complications—though not involving you, I hope, as I doubt whether the man in question has sufficient material knowledge of your affairs seriously to incommode you. I shall do what I can to retrieve the position, but I may not be immediately successful. You will, no doubt, be able to read all

the developments in the paper—they concern a certain Mrs. Langton in much the same way as, if your uncle had escaped, they might have concerned you. Though the exact meaning of the occurrences will probably remain obscure to you, you will be able to form a fairly accurate judgment from the extent of undesirable attention my activities receive as to the extremity of my position at any given hour.

'I have only troubled you with the matter because I felt tolerably certain that my name would appear in the papers and you would be feeling anxious; and, also because the turn which events take may of necessity affect you to some slight extent. Thus, I may be able to settle matters quietly before they go too far, in which case, of course, the arrangement between ourselves will proceed as heretofore. But such a happy result may not be achieved. Matters may pass beyond my control, and I be driven to seek seclusion for a spell of indefinite duration abroad. In the latter unhappy case an important question, as between you and me, will at once arise; the terms of our contract will require immediate revision. For it is obvious that if I retire to the continent, much as I should like it, I can neither take your Uncle Cormack with me nor continue to entertain him here, and the purpose of this letter is to request you to make your arrangements with this in view. At any moment I may have to leave. I therefore desire you to hold yourself in readiness from now on to pay over the remaining three thousand that you owe me in cash, immediately upon demand. Then, if I am driven

abroad, I will, on my way, collect the money, and upon its receipt, regarding your safety as of prime importance, delay my departure until I have dealt logically and finally with your dear uncle, whose continued existence would endanger you. But if by any chance you do not find this new arrangement agreeable and fail to deliver the three thousand pounds upon demand, I shall not jeopardise my quick and easy retreat—or my soul—to this extent, but will leave your esteemed uncle to his own devices—and doubtless he will easily free himself from his captivity. It matters little to me what happens when I am no longer here. The choice is yours, my dear Hubert. I am quite indifferent.

'JOHN STONE

'P.S.—Your dear uncle is kindly writing this in his own hand to my dictation. I asked him to do so for two reasons: that you might be assured he is still among the quick, and that he himself might fully understand the position and prepare himself for either of the two alternatives that rest upon your choice.'

Marr would be reading of the activities of John Stone in the papers and would be feverishly reckoning up the chances. He would have to make that awful choice. Fear would be too strong. He would go to Benyon for the money. Grouchy smiled. Hubert couldn't get the money from Benyon, that was certain. Then, what dread, what terror! Yes, Hubert would suffer in no less degree than Violet Langton. Another severe shock might send him mad, Benyon had said!

And Stone, what of him? He, too, would be reading the descriptions of himself in the papers and learning of the hue and cry. He would know his time was coming; but he would find it difficult to move with safety, either to fly or fight. He would be hiding in the house off Baker Street, sending his emissaries here and there, hoping against hope that he might yet find Grouchy and stifle that telltale voice for ever before it was too late. Yes, Stone would wait trembling until he, Grouchy, was ready to kill.

Grouchy sat turning over these thoughts in his mind, every little while a smile of evil satisfaction relaxing the hard, determined lines of his mouth, and modifying the fierce glint of battle and victory that lit up his steely eyes. . . .

Late in the morning, when he heard his landlady leave the house to do her necessary round of shopping, he got up. That was what he had been waiting for. He removed his beard, brushed his hair away from his forehead, hung Stone's monocle once more round his neck, and went out. He hadn't far to go, and he was glad of it; for this was the last time, he hoped, that he would have to venture out while parading all the essential features of the published description of John Stone, and risk detection in the open streets.

At a small cycle shop a few streets away, he stopped. Entering, he was importantly informed by a small, dirty little girl that her big brother, the proprietor of the shop, was out. He had gone out the night before, she said, and she did not know when he would be back. But just as

Grouchy was leaving, a young man, the proprietor himself, arrived. He was an intelligent-looking young fellow, covered from head to foot in stiff leather garments, thickly bespattered with mud. The sharp angles and straight lines of his outer clothes gave him almost the uncouth appearance of a mechanical man. But he seemed to glow warmly enough within. Directly he saw Grouchy, he gave him a hearty 'Good-morning, sir. Just a mo' while I get rid of these things,' and began tearing off his leather coat.

'What luck?' asked Grouchy, fixing upon the young man an inquiring and bemonocled stare.

'All the luck in the world,' answered the young man, laughing gaily as he wrestled with his leggings.

Grouchy rubbed his hands together and smiled acidly.

'Yes,' the young man went on, 'everything happened just as you said it would; and I did exactly as you told me.'

'Excellent!' said Grouchy. 'Start from the beginning and tell me everything.'

'Well, I went to Brunswick Gardens after dark, and waited down at the corner of the square, watching the house, as you wanted. I waited and waited and waited, until at last a policeman got interested in me, thought I was up to no good myself, and told me to move on. I did. But I came back and took up another position at the opposite corner soon afterwards. When midnight came without anything having happened I began to think you had sent me off on a

wildgoose chase. But I stuck it out, and in the end, about two o'clock in the morning, when the streets were quiet and all the lights in the houses out, a large car drove past me and drew up outside number forty-three. Two men got out; I couldn't see what they were like from the distance; I could only just see they were men. They went straight down the area steps, and must have broken in or been admitted at once, for within a couple of minutes they reappeared, struggling with a great box of some sort—just as you said would happen—'

'Magnificent!' Grouchy cried excitedly. 'I thought she wouldn't open it. Get rid of it at all costs, that's all she thought about.'

'Steady, you're going faster than I am,' the young man burst in. 'I haven't mentioned any woman. I didn't even see one. Was there one there?'

'Never mind. You're here to answer, not to ask questions. Go on.'

'Well, when they had loaded the box on to the car, they drove off, and I followed. Right through London, and out into the country—by Jove, they led me a dance! But I don't think they knew that they were being followed; I switched off my lights as soon as we got out of town in case they looked back, and just kept their lights in sight in the front of me. They can't have heard me either or they wouldn't have done what they did. And that's not surprising, either, as the car kicked up the devil of a din. Phew! We licked it! Fairly ate up the country! I travel fast myself, but I never want to risk

my neck at that speed and at night without lights on again. I guess we travelled at times close on—' He hesitated, wondering how much Grouchy would swallow.

'Never mind how fast,' Grouchy interrupted; 'the point is, where did you go?'

'We went out of London, through Roehampton, then to Kingston and down the Portsmouth Road to Guildford. There they turned off suddenly on to the Dorking Road—I nearly lost them. And I nearly lost them again when they turned south off the Guildford-Dorking road at a village I didn't know the name of then, but afterwards discovered was Gomshall. A long climb took us to the top of a ridge of the North Downs. Just over the top, they stopped suddenly in a dark clump of pines that stretched across the road; so suddenly that I nearly gave myself away by running slap into their tail. However, I pulled up in time and pushed the old bike into the heather and bracken at the side of the road. Then I crept forward and watched. They unloaded the box, carried it to the far edge of the pines, and shot it off their shoulders. It disappeared absolutely and I heard a big splash. After that, they turned the car round and went back the way they had come. When they were safely out of the way, I went to see what they had done with the old box, and found it was an old gravel-pit, half full of water, that they had chucked it into. I couldn't see the box, of course; it's down under the water.'

'Splendid!' Grouchy cried. 'And you could find the place again?'

'Yes. I waited there until it was light enough to make absolutely certain of my bearings. And here I am, just come straight back, dead beat, and without any breakfast.'

'Well done!'

'That's all I can tell you,' the young man said. Then with a sorely puzzled expression on his face he asked: 'But how did you know exactly what they were going to do? You as good as described it all to me before I went. If you knew so much already, I wonder you bothered to send me!'

Grouchy laughed. 'I didn't know,' he said. 'I only made a fairly good guess. I had no idea where they would take it to; I only forecast that they would take it somewhere, and I turned out to be right. They might just as well have done something else. But when people are in a panic, you can nearly always rely upon them doing the clumsy and obvious thing.'

'Are they in a panic? Why? What's in the old box, anyway?'

'Nothing to be in a panic about, certainly. As a matter of fact—this in the strictest confidence—it contains a sack of potatoes and a couple of dead rabbits.'

'Potatoes and rabbits!' exclaimed the young man. 'Surely, sir—'

'No, I am not joking. Potatoes and rabbits, that is all, upon my word. But then perhaps they don't know that.' Grouchy smiled wickedly.

The young man laughed incredulously and opened his mouth to ask another question. But Grouchy raised a warning hand.

'No more questions,' he said. 'I shall tell you nothing more. The giving of information is not my part of our bargain. Here's a fiver—the two pounds I promised you and three more besides, because you have done your work so well. That discharges all my obligations to you.'

'Thank you, sir—'

'By the way, have you seen this morning's papers?'

'No. But thank you—'

Grouchy pushed back his hat and gently rubbed the scar on his forehead while the young man gazed gratefully at him and renewed his thanks. 'You'll probably find,' Grouchy said, 'the answer to these questions you've asked in the paper to-day or to-morrow, and perhaps the answers to some you haven't as well!'

The young man paid little attention to Grouchy's remark. He was lost in contemplation of the sudden riches which had been placed upon the counter before him, and of their generous donor. He continued murmuring his thanks after Grouchy's retreating figure.

'There's a rum man!' he exclaimed when Grouchy had gone. 'A fiver for doing a job like that! I wish I could meet his kind every day. . . . Good Lord!' He ran to the door of the shop and looked up and down the street for signs of his departed employer. There were no signs of Grouchy now. The young man came slowly back into the shop with a pained and puzzled expression on his face. 'Good Lord! I feel like a blooming thief, taking the money. He hires me

to do one thing only, and then I forget about it. I never told him exactly where they had dumped the old box, never showed him the spot on the map or anything. He'll never find it with the bit of information I gave him. But he never asked me for any details—that's funny! Oh, well, I suppose he'll come back for them when he remembers.' And the young man pocketed the five-pound note with a clear conscience.

But Grouchy never returned to ask the exact locality of the waterlogged quarry. He went back to his lodgings and there, adorned again in his false whiskers, spent the rest of the day in idle speculation as to what would happen next, and how he would deal with each possible eventuality. Only two events were as certain as the coming of the day; the police would discover that the John Stone of the Seaford affair had sent a packing-case to Violet Langton and would investigate the matter and institute a search for the mysterious package; and sooner or later the young motor-cyclist, reading the newspapers, would see the description of John Stone and the reports of the mysterious packing-case and come forward with his story of his midnight escapade and lead the police to the disused quarry.

Grouchy laughed savagely at the thought of the police dragging the water in the quarry and their utter dismay when they discovered the nature of the contents of the box. How would Violet Langton explain away her odd conduct towards such a harmless object? Even if she managed to avert calamity this time, she would fall sooner or later. It was only a question of time. Hubert

Marr would be the next centre of activity. How long would they all hold out, this Violet Langton, Hubert Marr, and Stone?

CHAPTER XVI

'FIND THE BOX AND FIND THE BODY!'

LATER in the same day, the day upon which he had interviewed the young motor-cyclist, Grouchy went out again; but this time fully whiskered and only as far as Earl's Court Station to buy the evening papers. Back in his lodgings, he studied them intently.

Those hardy, irrepressible men, the newspaper reporters, scenting good copy in scandal that touched a society name so well known as that of Mrs. Langton, had been early on the trail, conducting their astute inquiries in every possible direction. The little professor in Oxfordshire was now receiving all, and a great deal more than, the measure of publicity which he had originally sought. And his present fame was of even more doubtful quality than earlier in the day. The Press, tired of laughing at him, now irritably declared him a positively dangerous ass who had done the public no service, but considerable injury, in aiding and harbouring a lunatic of such noxious character as John Stone, and one that any man—any man but Professor Dudgeon—would at first sight have recognised as mad. The little man, however, was still sticking manfully to his guns. Who, he had demanded of his innumerable inter-

viewers—his nanny-goat beard, no doubt, bristling with rage—who were those terrible men who had ransacked his house in their pursuit of John Stone? If they had been asylum attendants, as had been suggested, they would long before now have identified themselves publicly. Alternatively, if they were accomplices of John Stone, as had also been suggested, then they were equally mad and dangerous. And anyway, what had they been doing by the river-bank? And why had John Stone been insensible?

The reporters, as unable to answer as they were unwilling graciously to acknowledge their defeat, took refuge in the merely offensive suggestion that as the professor's story had been so obviously exaggerated in part, it could not be relied upon at all for a correct statement of what had happened that night, beyond the bare fact that he had been visited by John Stone. Until the truth were known, the professor's story had better be forgotten, they suggested. Thus, for the moment, Professor Dudgeon was brushed aside.

But while all the old knots remained, new information had been pouring in. Much of the late history of John Stone was now becoming known and the events of the last two days were beginning to shape themselves into a consecutive and, to the newspaper reporters, a fairly intelligible story. The landlord of Hill House had been one of the first of the new people to lodge information concerning the obscure life of the wanted man. He stated that John Stone had been his tenant at Hill House for the last eighteen months, and complained that he had always had the great-

est difficulty in obtaining payment of the rent, and for the last six months had received nothing at all. At the very time, he stated, when he first learnt of the extraordinary happenings that culminated in the complete disappearance of the debtor, he had just been consulting his solicitors with a view to issuing a writ to enforce payment.

The story of John Stone's financial embarrassment at the time of his hasty departure from Oxfordshire was further borne out by numerous tradesmen in the neighbourhood of Hill House, and especially the local butcher. They all had tales to tell of unpaid bills and overdue accounts. In the aggregate Stone's acknowledged debts must have amounted to a very considerable sum. And that was not all. It was strongly hinted that Stone's account at the local bank was badly overdrawn. But this was chiefly surmise. The bank manager himself had preserved a discreet silence, and the rumour was only founded upon some extremely ambiguous remarks made by one of the clerks at the bank and quite unauthentic reports of unmet cheques. Nevertheless, from the facts that were already definitely known, it was a reasonable assumption to draw—and most of the reporters did draw it—that Stone at the time of his disappearance had been fairly deep in debt. It was perhaps less reasonable to assume from that—as some of the reporters did assume—that Stone had left Oxfordshire because of his debts; and then, indulging in the wildest flights of fancy, suggest that his attack on Violet Langton was part of a clumsy attempt to obtain money from

her by threats. Yet the theory of the lunatic practical joker was now commonly dropped in favour of this new theory of a bankrupt attempting, by threats of scandal and publicity, to extort money from a nervous and naturally retiring woman. This new idea was the root cause of the trouble with the little professor. His story, being incompatible with it, had to be discredited. Accordingly, the weight of the Oxfordshire story was minimised as far as possible by the casting of veiled insults at Professor Dudgeon's veracity.

The new evidence that had come to light concerning Stone did not end with that which dealt with his financial difficulties. Piece by piece a fairly accurate summary of his movements since he left Hill House had now been built up. After leaving Hill House—time unknown—with all his goods and chattels, he had first been seen by Professor Dudgeon at about 1 A.M. on May 4th. On the same morning between the hours of nine forty-five and eleven he had, almost beyond doubt, been seen first by a waitress in the station hotel at Paddington, then by a couple of old men in a public library near by. Shortly after that, he was reported to have purchased a false black beard and moustache from a well-known hairdresser. But this last story, like the professor's, was largely disbelieved, as the hairdresser, a Gascon, had expanded in such extravagantly eulogistic terms upon the perfection and undetectable falseness of the whiskers he had supplied, that, combined with the fact that Stone had been wearing no disguise at Seaford later in the same day, when there was surely every reason for him to disguise

himself if he could, it appeared probable that in the John Stone story the hairdresser had seen and cleverly seized an opportunity of getting the papers to advertise his wares for nothing. Not much attention, therefore, was paid to him. At about four in the afternoon of May 4th, Stone had visited the Belvedere Road police-station at Seaford, and in company with the sergeant he had gone to the mortuary. Next came some fresh and startling news of great importance which carried the story a considerable distance further. A woman near the Seaford mortuary stated that in the evening of May 4th a man, exactly corresponding in appearance to the published description of John Stone, had engaged her furnished apartments for the night. And the most interesting parts of her somewhat rambling statement were these: This man had brought to the house a large packing-case; she, a light sleeper, had been awakened about midnight by the noise of her lodger leaving the house; about three quarters of an hour later she had heard him return; shortly after that, she had crept downstairs to discover the meaning of a violent racket that was proceeding from the sitting-room and, through the half-open door, had seen her lodger hammering down the lid of the packing-case with the fire-tongs; finally, judging from the way the cabman and a casual loafer who had assisted him had both groaned and sweated when, next morning, they had carried the packing-case out to a cab and hoisted it on top, its contents, as well as being bulky, must have been of unusual weight. The last items of this diary of events consisted of the

announcement of the discovery by the police in the early hours of May 5th that the window of the mortuary was open and the dead body of Henry Birkett gone.

Over this fresh news the papers waxed violently excited. The landlady's report, they declared, made it abundantly clear what had happened. Stone had stolen the body and carried it away in the packing-case for some unknown but undoubtedly nefarious purpose. In chorus they cried, and in the heaviest type: ' Find the box and find the body!'

Certainly the chain of circumstantial evidence was strong, and there was every justification, on the evidence available at the moment, for a suspicion, amounting almost to a belief, that the disappearance of the body and the appearance of the packing-case were connected. What Stone wanted with the body was not clear. Perhaps, it was suggested, this was another obscure move on his part in his villainous scheme to extort money from Mrs. Langton—the papers loved to drag each event as far as it were humanly possible within the four walls of their ridiculous explanation of the whole affair.

Further reports were expected any minute. The police were now concentrating upon the search for the packing-case as well as the pursuit of Stone. They were following up all clues with the utmost possible speed. Reporters and police were swarming along the trail. At this moment inquiries were being conducted at the railway-station.

In the stop-press column appeared the latest

news of the 'Mystery of the man with the scar,' as it was now called. And how the reporters must have loved it, appearing as it did to support their stupid theory:

'Mystery of man with scar. The packing-case was dispatched yesterday morning from Seaford Station by John Stone addressed to Honourable Mrs. Langton.'

Grouchy, reading these reports, laughed contemptuously as he imagined the bitter anguish they would cause his victims. His plans so far had worked admirably. The curiosity of the public had been deeply aroused and the police were interesting themselves in earnest. He himself had merely provided a few signposts which pointed out the direction in which search must be made if the crimes of Stone and his accomplices were to be discovered. The scent had been picked up eagerly by the sleuth-hounds of the law and the scandalmongers of the press. They were all rushing pell-mell along the trail. The going was good and the scent was strong. But what were they hunting? Not one of them knew the real nature of their quarry.

Grouchy found much to amuse him, standing on one side watching the progress of his schemes and the antics of his blind puppets. He hoped that the young motor-cyclist would soon read the papers carefully and, going to the police, discover to them the whereabouts of the missing packing-case and thus give fresh impetus to the hunt. Matters would become more serious then. Questions would be asked of Violet Langton which she would find it difficult to answer satisfactorily.

Suspicion would raise its head, and, once aroused, would not easily be set at rest.

Yet the bare discovery of the case and its contents would tell the police little or nothing. Violet Langton would have suffered agonies lest it should be discovered, and fresh agonies after it had been found. She would have to invent some lame explanation of its sudden disappearance from her house. It was during this period of terrible uncertainty and alarm that she would drink her cup of bitterness which was the just retribution for the suffering she had caused. She might survive this first onslaught with some false tale; but only to have it fall about her head directly. Grouchy would shatter the foundation of her defences as fast as they were built. He would go on driving her from refuge to refuge, until suddenly the end would come; unable to struggle or dissemble longer, she would collapse and give herself utterly away. Then she would stand her trial like any other murdress.

And Marr, too. Grouchy would bring publicity a little nearer home to him directly. In a day or two he would throw out a hint that would be pregnant with meaning and hideous menace, and rivet the uncomprehending eyes of the public and police upon Hubert as he had upon Violet Langton and John Stone. But there was no hurry; the more delay the longer they would have to endure. It was the slow, inexorable torture that would break them one by one. . . .

For the moment, Grouchy contented himself with writing a short note to the editor of that paper which was making the greatest display of

the 'Mystery of the man with the scar.' The letter ran:

'If my calculations prove correct, by the time you receive this to-morrow morning, the packing-case which this evening figures so largely in your columns will have been found, and the peculiar but harmless nature of its contents revealed.

'The body of Meyrick Vane, by some believed to be that of one Henry Birkett, which the packing-case was thought to contain, still lies in the Seaford mortuary, in the centre cupboard beneath the marble slab.

'JOHN STONE.'

CHAPTER XVII

VIOLET LANGTON IS DISCOURAGED

GROUCHY's satisfaction was not unfounded. His plans had worked well and his guess had been correct: Violet Langton was racked by impotent fear.

She, too, had been scanning the evening papers and knew only too well that the hue and cry for Stone was in reality directed against her by the unseen hand of Grouchy.

Grouchy! She turned the name over in her mind and shuddered. Grouchy! The very hardness of the name seemed somehow to symbolise the fate she might expect, the quality of the mercy she would receive. She was to be hounded to death by him—by Grouchy!

'My God, if I could come face to face with him,' she cried, as, standing slightly to one side of the drawing-room window, her eyes searched the faces of passers-by down in the street below, expecting to find—to find—what? She didn't know. He, Grouchy, would not come, look up at the windows and laugh at her. No, he would remain invisible until the end—the end of all. And while he hid himself, dealing his blows from the darkness of his concealment, she could do nothing but wait—wait to receive them, unable

to avoid them, unable to strike back, unable to do anything but struggle vainly, inventing fresh lies, absurd inventions, hopelessly inadequate to guard the threatened points. But how could this go on indefinitely? Sooner or later, she realised, she would be caught by her own stories. They would not tally with each other. How could they, when they were directed to meet one solitary point—the particular point threatened at the moment—fail to leave weakened or unguarded other points of attack against which the next onslaught might suddenly fall? The mind of Grouchy was inscrutable. She knew not whence to expect the coming blow. Fear surrounded her, hemmed her in; every one was her enemy, everything dangerous. To stand still was as fatal as to move. . . .

'Why doesn't he tell all he knows and have done with it?' she murmured as she moved away from the window. 'Must I endure this dragging out?'

She was a brave woman, possessing fierce courage borne of her strong animal nature. She would fight to the end if only she could have something to strike against; but she could not struggle against nor hope to stem a relentless force which she could neither see nor feel—a force which had only a name: Grouchy!

Stone had told her everything the evening before. When she had arrived at his house off Baker Street he had attempted to greet her, bending to kiss her hand and murmuring, 'This pleasure, dear lady—' But he had stopped short in the middle of his welcome, and quickly dropped

the hand upon which he would have pressed his lips, on finding that it held a small gleaming revolver so tightly clenched within its grasp that the knuckles formed a row of white, bloodless points against the pink flesh. He had quickly dropped his suave, affected mode of speech and told her plainly of Grouchy's escape and all else that had happened. When she heard how Grouchy had learnt everything of her history, trembling with fury she had had a sudden wild impulse to shoot Stone where he stood. She had actually raised the revolver and aimed; but had asked herself in time what was the use now the thing was done. She had thought, too, of the packing-case and its gruesome contents lying in her house. Stone's help would be needed to get rid of that. Together they had hastily arranged for its removal in the first way that occurred to their fevered minds.

Then they had held a council of war, trying first to guess the reason why Grouchy was acting as he was—in the dark—instead of going straight to the police and making a full statement of all he knew. They rightly came to the conclusion that it was because Grouchy wished for a deeper revenge and was anxious to prolong their agony. Herein, when they came to order their defences, they found room for a thin ray of hope which gave them a little courage to fight on. If Grouchy intended to pursue them along devious and hidden ways, to play cat-and-mouse with them, the truth would be but slowly and gradually revealed. A silencing knife or shot might save them, if they could find him before too much was out. Ever

since the first moment of Grouchy's escape, Stone's men had been searching for Grouchy, following up every clue that might lead them to his hiding-place. They had got to Seaford only just after he had left, but so far that was the nearest they had been to success. Time was running against them. With time, anxiety and terror increased and hope faded away. But still there was time. Until the very last moment a swift blow might save them.

'If only I could but find him,' Violet Langton repeated as she paced up and down the room, the events of the past few days running riot in her memory. 'Another day—another hour perhaps—and it may be too late. . . .' She had seen the stop-press column of the evening paper. She knew that it had already been discovered that the packing-case had been sent to her. At any minute she expected the police to come again to renew their inquiries in the light of this new information. She was ready for them—more or less. She thought she could fence with them successfully over the disappearance of the case from her house. That would give a little more time—a little more time to search for Grouchy. And the police would be a long time, days—a week perhaps—finding the case and its hideous contents. Stone had told her he had hidden it well. She could carry on the struggle until they found it; but then—the body—no, it was too horrible! She could not face the body. Stone must find Grouchy before the case and its terrible contents were discovered by the police. . . .

She returned to her post by the window and

resumed her senseless but unwearying search. Presently she noticed without surprise a cab draw up at her front door and the inspector who had called on her the day before, accompanied by a policeman, step out and cross the pavement to the house. She hid the evening paper away. 'Invented explanations sound more genuine if they come spontaneously to meet ostensibly unexpected situations,' she thought. As soon as the maid had announced the policeman's presence, Violet Langton walked straight downstairs and submitted herself to the interview in the hall.

'Sorry to trouble you again, Mrs. Langton,' the inspector began, 'but we had some further information this afternoon which has brought us round here. You've seen the evening papers?'

Violet Langton shook her head.

'What is it?' she asked.

The inspector pulled a copy out of his pocket and pointed to a column which dealt with the landlady's story at Seaford. 'You see,' he commented, 'it looks as if the packing-case mentioned there contained the body.'

Violet Langton read the article with apparent interest.

'How disgusting,' she said. 'Do you think it really did?'

The inspector, who had been watching her closely, now looked at her with considerable surprise.

'The Lord knows, I don't,' he said. 'But—begging your pardon—that's what I've come to ask you.'

'Me! What should I know about it?'

'A good deal, I should have thought. You've got the box. We've brought a cab to take it away.'

Violet Langton did not give herself away. The slightly offended expression which she had at first assumed changed readily into one of complete dismay.

'I—I don't understand—'

'Well, look at the late news in that paper you've got in your hand,' said the inspector meaningly.

Violet Langton turned the pages and glanced at the stop-press column. She gasped, looked blankly at the inspector, and then, as if the memory of it had just suddenly returned to her, shuddered and cried:

'Oh! Horrible! How too revolting! The box that came yesterday—do you mean to say that was it?'

The inspector nodded. 'You remember,' he said feelingly, 'the message your cook sent you about the smell.'

Violet Langton closed her eyes for a moment, and bowed her head. Then:

'You must take it away—take it away at once,' she implored. 'I will show you where it is. Thank Heaven it has not been opened. Come along; I will take you to it. You will take it away now, won't you?' Displaying every outward sign of extreme agitation, she led the way down to the kitchen quarters, through the scullery, finally pointing down a short flight of stone steps beyond. 'It's down there,' she whispered nervously. 'Down in the cellar.' And she turned away.

The two men, without hesitation, went down into the cellar, leaving Violet Langton trembling at the top of the steps, and beside her Mrs. Lyndon Panks, who had left her cooking to follow the three people when they had passed through her kitchen, to see what had brought them downstairs.

Presently the inspector reappeared.

'Not there,' he said shortly.

'Not there!' Violet Langton replied. 'Of course it's there. It must be.' Then, turning to the cook, she asked: 'Mrs. Panks, where did you put that packing-case that came yesterday? I sent word to you to have it put down there.'

'It was put down there, mum,' came the ready reply. 'It's in the far corner. If that's what they want, I'll show it to the officers. . . .' And she went down the steps to the cellar. The inspector and the policeman moved aside to let her pass, but did not follow. In a moment Mrs. Panks came back, looking very crestfallen. It was obvious that her quest had been unsuccessful.

'Are you sure it was ever put there?' asked the inspector gruffly.

Mrs. Panks cast an angry look at him and, ignoring him, turned to Violet Langton to reply.

'I'm as sure as I stand here, mum. I showed the men the very spot. As far away as possible, I says, with a smell to it like that. . . .'

The inspector and the policeman exchanged significant glances. The former addressed himself again to the cook.

'Well, it's not there now. You've seen that for yourself. Perhaps it was moved before you went to bed?'

'Well, it certainly was not,' replied Mrs. Panks haughtily. 'I never touched it, nor would any one else without asking me. I wouldn't have gone near it at all if I could have helped it. You never smelt anything . . .'

'Yes, yes, yes, my good woman,' interrupted the inspector testily. 'That's all very well. But can you explain how it's vanished? A packing-case can't move of its own accord or dissolve into the air. This is all most suspicious! Do you personally lock all the doors and windows down here?'

Mrs. Panks forgot her importance and became frightened. 'Yes, sir, if you please,' she answered ingratiatingly, and gathered up the corners of her apron in preparation for tears that she had at call for all appropriate moments. 'Oh, sir,' she went on, 'you don't really think it's been stole, do you, sir?' Her lips gave a premonitory quiver.

'I don't think at all in cases like this,' said the inspector, speaking with unconscious truth in the effort to appear darkly mysterious and impressive. But Mrs. Panks seemed to find great comfort in his words and dropped the corner of her apron with a deep sigh of relief.

'Show me the windows and doors and how you lock them,' the inspector commanded.

Mrs. Panks busied about, talking volubly, explaining to the inspector with much unnecessary detail exactly how she fastened each particular

window and door round and about the kitchen premises. But coming presently to the main kitchen window, which looked out into the area, she stopped talking suddenly and again gathered up the corner of her apron threateningly.

'Oh, dear me,' she said in a choking voice, turning to Violet Langton and looking at her appealingly; 'I forgot to tell you, mum.' And she surrendered herself to the sweet comfort of unrestrained tears.

'Forgot to tell me what?'

'That the catch on this window is broken,' put in the inspector hurriedly, in order to be able to announce the fact as his own startling discovery. Then he turned for a cursory examination of the window to see if there were any traces left of an unlawful entry.

'Yes, m'm. Oh, dear! I told that girl to remind me . . .' sobbed Mrs. Panks. Violet Langton, intensely relieved, soothed her.

'I think that is all we need see down here, Mrs. Langton,' said the inspector importantly, after a short survey. 'Now I should like to have a few words with you in private.' The inspector, the policeman, and Violet Langton made their way back to the hall in silence.

'This business becomes more extraordinary at every turn,' began the inspector ponderously, when the three of them were closeted in the morning-room. 'The box has vanished—there seems no room for doubt of that. And it looks as if it must have been stolen.' Such, indeed, was the lame tale Violet Langton herself had been intending to suggest as an explanation of the box's

mysterious disappearance; but she had never expected that this conclusion would be jumped at without the assistance of a single one of the slight points of evidence she had herself prepared and been proposing to discover. She kept them to herself now and let the inspector talk. It was better to use as little as possible of the false. . . .

'Do you suspect any one in the house of complicity?' the inspector was asking.

'No, no one.'

'I cannot understand it. Why you should be made the centre of the activities of this man Stone is sufficiently inexplicable in itself. But why and by whom the box should be stolen after Stone had gone to so much trouble to get it here beats me entirely.' The simple-minded man was completely out of his depth; his uningenious mind could invent no conceivably plausible solution. He stood, shifting from leg to leg and looking merely stupid, a hopelessly puzzled expression on his face. Then, coming to a sudden decision, he said: 'I must make a report of this at once to Headquarters,' and moved briskly towards the door.

But Violet Langton had no intention of letting him go so easily. A little abuse of the police and the inadequacy of their methods would assist, she thought, in stalling off suspicion from herself a while longer.

'And please inform the heads of your department,' she said, 'that I now intend to take this matter up seriously. As a member of the public I am entitled to police protection. Yet I have first been grossly slandered, then the dead body

of an old tramp has been sent to me, and finally my house has been broken into. All this within the space of forty-eight hours! It is an absolute outrage! I should have thought the last offences would have been adequately guarded against after the police once had notice of the way I was being victimised by this unknown scoundrel. But, no —nothing was done—nothing! . . .' And she turned on her heel and walked away without heeding the stumbling apology of the wretched inspector.

Late that night Violet Langton sat in the drawing-room trying to calm her shaken nerves and persuade herself that no advantage could be obtained from sitting up indefinitely, even if sleep was out of the question. Sooner or later she must go to bed. She must rest if she were to go on.

Already the struggle was beginning to tell on her physical appearance. Her eyes were more listless now, only awakening occasionally to their old activity; her lips were less tightly compressed, the tenseness and energy of her expression had given place to a quasi-furtive look which spoke of lurking fear and but spasmodic courage.

There was still no news from Stone. Grouchy was as intangible and menacing as ever. True, the threat of the police had been warded off for the moment. But to what end? It was only a question of time. They could not remain blind much longer—even if Grouchy did not move again. None of the theories of the police would hold water for a moment. They would see that

presently. In the end they were bound to stumble upon the truth. She wondered why she should seek to prolong the struggle, prolonging her own agony. It was only that one little ray of hope that made her hang on so grimly. If only Grouchy could be found and silenced by death, it was possible, just possible, that she might yet be able to save herself. But another word from him, or the discovery of the box and the body, and it would be too late. She couldn't, she wouldn't face the body. . . .

The telephone rang shrilly on the table beside her. That might be the very news she was longing for. Stone had traced Grouchy? Her heart thumped within her. The relief would be too great to bear. She let the bell ring on for a moment, gathering courage to lift the receiver.

'Hallo!' She could hardly form the commonplace word in her fever of anxiety. And it was a man's voice that was speaking indistinctly at the other end! He asked:

'Is that Mrs. Langton?'

'Yes.'

'I rang up hoping you had not gone to bed. I knew you would wish to know at once.'

'Yes.'

'We've got on the track—'

'Yes!' She could hardly hold the receiver to her ear.

'We'll know the result very soon. Stone was evidently expecting your house to be burgled—'

A deep sob broke from her lips. She knew the voice now. Her hand holding the receiver fell limply away from her ear. But suddenly

she mustered her strength again and listened desperately.

'—extraordinary,' the voice of the inspector was saying. 'He had your house watched and the thieves followed. The young man knows exactly where the case is. We sent some men with him to the place an hour or more ago. I'm afraid we shall want you to come here first thing in the morning to see the body—it might possibly give you some inkling as to what this business is all about. It's just an off-chance, but . . .' The receiver fell from Violet Langton's hand. In its fall it dragged the standard with it from the table on to the floor. A slight clicking told that some one was still speaking at the other end.

'Blast him!' she hissed through her clenched teeth. 'Blast him! Already . . . See the body . . . I will not . . . Too late now . . . Grouchy . . .' She went swiftly to a small bureau standing in the corner, and from an inner drawer drew out a metal article which flashed back reflected points of light as she turned it over in her hand.

'Grouchy . . .' There was still something she appeared to want to say, some idea which she could not form into words. 'Grouchy . . .'

She pressed the little piece of flashing mechanism between her breasts.

A sharp, piercing crack rang out.

Violet Langton's lips relaxed, parted. Her body fell softly forward and lay huddled unnaturally on the floor.

The telephone drummed hollowly as the operator at the exchange did as he was bid and tried to 'get that number again.'

CHAPTER XVIII

SILKY'S MOODS AND CALCULATIONS

'ALL I know and all I want to know is what I read here,' said Snobbit with finality, viciously striking with one hand the paper which he held in the other. 'That's enough for me. Rabbits! Potatoes! Suicide! What next, I'd like to know? That finishes it as far as I'm concerned. I'm off!'

Stone, leaning against the mantelpiece, one arm stretched along its naked top, gazed languidly at the speaker.

'I'm off, I tell you,' Snobbit repeated, angry at Stone's show of indifference. 'Off! To-day!' He flourished the paper about excitedly.

Stone waved him away. 'Run along then,' he sighed. 'Don't bother me any more about it; I decline to go all through the argument again. Of course, you will find desertion an excessively expensive game to play—but you will already have considered that.'

Snobbit snorted and glowered at Stone over his sagging lids. 'You're not going to keep me that way,' he snorted. 'I don't care a damn for your sneering threats. I know how to look after myself, thank you, Silky. If you think you can cheat me out of my share, you're wrong. What about

the others? They're all gone. Hooked it at once, they did! Do you think you can diddle them too? Not them. No, not them—nor me. You'll soon learn that. They're just waiting the other side of the Channel mounting guard, as it were, over your Paris bank account. A nice safe job! I'll go and join them, that's what I'll do. You won't be able to draw out a stiver without running into one or other of us. Then you'll have to divide up. It'd take a cleverer man than you—some one more like this Grouchy—to diddle us all. You haven't earned all the swag alone. No, not by a long chalk. It's share and share; and you'll pay out all right, we'll look to that. . . .'

'You are rambling, my dear Angelo.'

'Rambling, am I? We'll see who's rambling. I'm off.' He turned towards the door.

'Where are you going?' Stone asked wearily.

'To Paris. I told you—to join the others and wait for you.'

Stone yawned heavily. 'Oh, yes—yes, of course. *Bon voyage.*' But just as Snobbit was opening the door he added: 'It is curious that you should have been so utterly unnerved by this woman's death, but perhaps not altogether surprising; it only evidences again that weakness of your reasoning powers which I have frequently remarked before.'

Snobbit turned back, glaring.

'Good-bye,' said Stone quickly.

'You think you're very funny—' Snobbit began furiously.

'No. A student of human nature, occasionally a wit, but "funny"—never. But I am detain-

ing you. It is a pity you have to rush away like this. . . .'

Snobbit came back into the centre of the room. 'You think you're very funny, don't you?' he burst in. Stone shrugged his shoulders and raised his eyes to an unmerciful Heaven. 'But you're not,' Snobbit persisted. 'Now I'll talk straight to you for a bit before I go.' Stone sighed resignedly. 'I can reckon up chances same as you. The others bolted as soon as you let Grouchy slip through your fingers. They were a pack of fools, and a stinking lot of cowards into the bargain. Oh, yes, I'll admit all that; and I'll admit I'd have been glad to see them done out of their share of the boodle: they let us down. But you can't say the same of me; I stuck it out, and stuck it out for the very reason that I'm not a fool, I can reckon up the odds. I saw very well that if we could catch old Grouchy quick enough we'd be all right. But you said yourself that you didn't know what'd happen if we didn't lay hands on him again quick. Well, nor did I. Now, what 'appens? We didn't. He got right away and, what's more, we've got no trace of him even now, and don't look like getting it, either. And, I tell you straight, the pace he's setting and the way he's going about it is a darned sight too hot for my liking. Here's 'is first victim.' He flourished the paper under Stone's nose. 'Who'll be the next? Answer that! You, me, that young fool Marr, or who? That's what I want to know. And there's a dozen more nasty questions you can't answer. Where's old Vane's body now? What'll Grouchy do with it next? You don't know!

No; he's not the sort of customer I like, sneaking round corners, intangible. You've met your match this time, Silky, old boy, and the sooner you clear out, same as I'm going to do, the better for you. And there's a bit of plain speaking for you, good advice. What good do you expect out of 'anging on here?'

Stone winced ostentatiously. 'I can just stand slang,' he said, 'but not that. Hanging, please —with an aitch. When you are at all excited you should avoid like the plague all words beginning with aitch; I noticed the error more than once, and such painful mistakes rob your speeches of their naïve force. Hanging! I might add that, apart from its faulty pronunciation, the metaphor itself was rather unhappily chosen, bearing in mind our present liabilities. Hanging, my dear—'

Snobbit turned again to the door. 'All right, you stop 'ere, and laugh—and hang,' he aspirated savagely as he marched away.

Stone did not move. He maintained his careless attitude, one arm stretched out full length along the mantel-shelf, supercilious smile upon his thick lips, until he heard Snobbit lumbering heavily up the stairs, presumably to fetch a few things to take with him on his contemplated journey. But then suddenly, like a mask thrown off, his casual air vanished, the ironical smile faded from his lips, his eyes half closed and his brow contracted over deeply disturbing thoughts. . . . Things, indeed, were looking very black for him. No longer could he conceal from himself that at every turn Grouchy was proving too

strong for him; that he himself was unnerved, frightened of the man at whom he had once sneered. Unseen, but very real, Grouchy was here, there, reaching out, spreading his fingers to seize, weaving his spider's web. The very air was instinct with hidden menace. Stone shivered and drew himself together.

Snobbit said little that was not really true, he thought. Ever since that night when Grouchy had slipped from his clutches, that night when Grouchy, travelling to his death, had winked, displaying his outrageous confidence, matters had gone steadily from bad to worse. He had been robbed of the initiative. His own self-confidence had gone, and with it the confidence of others. He had been deserted by his few men—all except Snobbit—almost immediately upon his failure to make that vital recapture. And now Snobbit, the last of them, was going. He could not fight alone; he, too, would have to go. That was the only chance now. Until now he had carried on the struggle, vaguely hoping that a flash of luck would throw him upon Grouchy's track again. A swift stab in the back or some other desperate measure might have recovered the lost ground, might have meant real safety, with Grouchy playing his waiting, death-by-slow-degrees game. There was probably still plenty of time; for as yet Grouchy had hardly hinted at the truth. But time was of little value if Snobbit was going. If Snobbit went, the search for Grouchy would have to stop; for Snobbit had been following up the few clues which might have led to something, practically alone; he himself

had been unable to do much, he couldn't move freely enough, the published descriptions of the wanted man had made it far too dangerous. The search so far had been unsuccessful; but there was still time. But Snobbit was going. The search would automatically cease; and then there would be no hope of staying Grouchy's slow revelations before they had gone too far. He, Stone, had better get away before that time came, though it would only mean the comparative safety of a fugitive. Still, that was better than sitting waiting, alone, for the inevitable end. If only he could have laid hands on Grouchy! That would have been the quick, clean way. He couldn't fight against a hidden foe. The position was only barely tenable now; there was, at least, a hope. But it would be absolutely untenable if Snobbit went—just waiting to be netted, to provide the final dainty morsel in Grouchy's deadly repast! He wouldn't wait for that. He shivered, then shook himself and bent down to pick up the paper at his feet, which Snobbit had cast there in a last dramatic gesture before quitting the room.

Stone read again the flaring advertisement of Violet Langton's suicide. 'It's no good,' he thought, 'I cannot make him see if he won't. But this is helpful rather than the reverse.' He cursed Snobbit for a fool. If only he could persuade him to hang on for another or two days, that might be enough. They could always leave themselves time to run. But it was no use going over that ground again; the whole of the early morning had been spent in fruitless argument. How could this suicide materially alter their position for the

worse? It should rather be looked upon as an unexpected stroke of good fortune. Here was one of the only three persons in the world whose knowledge was of sufficient extent to make their very existence a danger—here was one of them had prevented the possibility of such knowledge being wrung from her, by the act of her own hand. No false sentiment had been wasted upon her! There was no fresh danger because of her suicide—far from it. She had done him a good turn by dying. If only Marr would follow suit, and Grouchy, fear might be altogether at an end.

It was true that, if Grouchy and Marr were also dead, there would be nothing left for Stone to fear. But there would be nothing left for him to struggle for either. Only one consideration had urged him to remain and struggle on against Grouchy until now, and that hinged upon the continued life of Marr. But he was just the sort of weak character—far weaker than Violet—who might well take his own life; and Heaven alone knew how he had been receiving these reports of John Stone that flooded the press. If Marr died, there would be little purpose in hanging on while Grouchy wove his fatal web; there would be no possibility then of obtaining that last payment of three thousand pounds. That was the crux of the matter. Stone craved for that final payment; nothing else would have kept him so long. If he could get hold of that he would clear at once and risk everything else. Grouchy was too strong. There was, after all, probably more hope of successfully avoiding pursuit than of stopping Grouchy with only Snobbit's poor wits

to help him. But while there was still a chance of laying hands on that money and while the door of escape still lay open behind him, Stone was prepared to take the risk, hang on and watch for his opportunity; and, as a secondary consideration, perhaps by a giant stroke of fortune find Grouchy too.

But with Grouchy moving in the darkness there were obstacles in the way of trying to get the money out of Marr. It was too dangerous to approach him. Stone had not dared communicate with Marr since the night of Grouchy's escape. He had no means of knowing how the land lay in that direction. There might be a trap hidden there. Grouchy could hardly know of his hiding-place in Furnes Terrace—that at least was a comfort. But Grouchy did know that Marr still owed him money; he, Stone, had told him so. Perhaps Grouchy was using that knowledge, hoping to trace him should he communicate with Marr in an endeavour to get that money. Everything lent colour to such an idea. There was nothing to show that Grouchy intended to follow his attack on Violet Langton with one on Marr. Perhaps Grouchy had forgiven his nephew and, at a price of his forgiveness, been promised the betrayal of his greatest enemy should he reveal himself. Marr could not refuse whatever terms Grouchy chose to offer. Thus it had remained too dangerous for Stone to get in touch again with Marr. Marr and that three thousand might be a deadly snare. . . .

Stone ran his eye through the columns of the paper, hoping to find, as day by day he had

vainly hoped to find, news which would tell him what was the true position between Grouchy and Marr. Nothing! The same old deadlock; hanging on for what he dared not try to get. If he only knew that Grouchy and Marr were together again—even that would be better than nothing. He would clear then, with the knowledge that he had left nothing behind; the hope of the last payment would have dissolved; just as the thinner hope of even stifling Grouchy's condemning voice would vanish if Snobbit held to his intention of bolting. But if Grouchy was proposing to victimise Marr as he had already victimised Violet Langton, then, with the aid of a little judicious lying, a little finesse, he might still get that three thousand out of Marr. But the papers were silent; there was no hint of an offensive opening against Marr. It looked suspicious, as though there was a trap. . . .

Stone heard Snobbit moving heavily about upstairs. 'He's going—I shall have to go too,' he thought. He looked longingly at a telephone that stood on a small table in the far corner. 'Telephone to Marr! Find out,' he thought. 'No, I've heard of people being traced that way before. All that will have been thought of if there's a trap. It's Grouchy I'm dealing with. . . .' Sounds of Snobbit's busy packing again reached him. 'I'd better burn my boats; make up my mind to go. Then perhaps I could risk it and phone. If I scent a trap, I can be gone before they trace me—it's slow work. And if it seems safe, I'll wait until this evening, or to-morrow even, to give him time to pay.' He crossed the

room, looked at the telephone doubtfully, walked away again. 'But I must,' he thought. Looking up and shaking his fist at the ceiling above which Snobbit was loudly stamping, he said aloud: 'It's your folly that has forced me into this.' He went back to the telephone and lifted the receiver gingerly, as though the ringing of the bell at the exchange was in itself enough to reveal to the whole world the vital secret of his hiding-place.

'Belgravia 6079.' He spoke softly, as if making a terrible confidence to the operator. A voice sharply requested him to speak up. In a moment he was put through.

'Is that Belgravia 6079?—Mr. Hubert Marr?—Ask him to come to the phone, please.—No, no name—a little surprise.'

Stone waited anxiously.

Presently he heard a weak 'Hallo!' trembling on the receiver.

'Is that Hubert Marr?'

'Yes. Who's that?'

'Be careful! It is I, John Stone.' A choking sob rattled down the phone.

'Sh! Quiet!' said Stone swiftly. 'Shut the door of the room you are in before you answer. See that no one is listening outside. Quick!'

There was a silence for a moment; then came a piteous, 'Stone, are you there?' followed by a torrent of trembling words. 'I have been waiting. Why have you been so long? All this in the papers! Your address, give it me. What does it mean? I must see you at once. Your letter—I can't do what you want. I can't do it, I tell you. You will make a murderer of me!

You've killed her; you shan't kill him. I will not do it. Where are you? I'll come and see you now. Oh, why did I ever believe you? But you see the choice I have? Murder or—or worse, now, if you let him go! You mustn't let him go! You must do something else—something else, I say.'

Stone took the receiver from his ear. What was all this hysterical gibberish? Marr had gone mad, crazy! To him the reports in the papers must have been terrifying in their very obscurity. They had driven him clear out of his wits. . . .

The receiver was still emitting a staccato rattle.

'Shut up!' Stone shouted suddenly into the phone and put the receiver again to his ear. Another sob came from the far end, followed by an inaudible mutter that gradually died away.

'There's nothing to worry about in what you have been reading in the papers,' Stone said, when all was quiet. 'I can explain all that. Besides, I've got the situation in hand. Nothing affecting you will come out—you're not concerned. I'll tell you about that later. I'm ringing you about another matter. I want that other three thousand at once.'

'I know, I know,' Marr burst in. 'But I can't —I can't tell you. I won't. I haven't even tried to get it since you wrote. You must find another way out. You must. If you kill him, he will know I did it; if you let him go, he will know I gave him up to you. He knows everything now! You mustn't let him go, anything but that. Why did you make him write the letter?

Devil! I can't choose now. Where are you? You mustn't let him go. I'll come. Are you there? Listening?'

'Yes, go on.' Stone was frowning. What was the fellow talking about? Letter! What letter?

'Why don't you speak?' Marr cried.

'I am waiting. You were saying something. Letter! What did you say about the letter?'

'Can't you see? You've told him everything now. If you let him go, he'll know; if you kill him, he'll know. You can't make me choose. No, not that. It's your fault—you've given it all away. You can't have meant what you wrote. There must be some other way. You say you've got the situation in hand; if that's so, you won't have to go. You can go on as before—is that it? You're not going to make me choose?'

Marr stopped. Stone waited, hoping Marr would go on again, say something which might give him guidance through this maze of hysterical nonsense. 'Letter! Wrote! Said!' He hadn't written anything to Marr. . . .

'Are you there? Why don't you say something?'

Stone sought desperately for something noncommittal to say. 'I don't quite understand your trouble,' he said at length, lamely.

'Your letter—' Marr began. But Stone stopped him quickly. That letter again! It was definite, however unintelligible. . . .

'Wait a moment,' Stone said. 'You are certain no one can overhear you?'

'No, not here.'

He would have to risk it, bring things to a head, take a jump at the truth. He asked: 'Have you the letter there, on you?'

'Yes.'

'I think you have misunderstood it. Read it over, aloud, to me. I will put you right.'

'No, it's clear—unless you've changed your mind.'

'Read it,' said Stone fiercely.

As he listened to Marr's halting, frightened voice slowly reading out the letter Grouchy had written, the ghost of the old evil sneer flickered again over his sensual lips. So friend Grouchy had opened his attack on Marr. The absence of news did not mean there was a trap, nor that Marr was to go unharmed. No, Grouchy was torturing him too, and torturing him in an even crueller way than he had tortured Violet Langton. Stone's smile broadened. It had been a neat conception of Grouchy's. But Grouchy had been a shade too clever, a little too ingenious this time; he had played right into his enemy's hands. Stone laughed. He himself could not have devised a scheme nor written a letter more suited to his immediate purpose. . . .

Marr came to the end. 'You didn't mean it,' he cried. 'You don't now. Not that choice. It is horrible!'

'I did; I do,' Stone answered. 'I was clear. There's nothing you could possibly misunderstand. I thought there must be something else for you to make such a fuss. You must choose, and choose quickly; I am going to-night. But there's nothing in that, nothing to make a fuss about. You're a

sensible fellow; you shouldn't be so squeamish. Deliver the three thousand and you'll never have anything to worry about again. Think of that —never worry again! By the way, pay no attention to this matter you've been reading about in the papers; I've got that nicely under control. It's all practically over now; but still I think I shall go away for a little while. It was unfortunate about Mrs. Langton, but she only had herself to blame—she wouldn't take my advice. But don't you lose your nerve like her. You listen to what I say. You pay over the three thousand and leave me to do the rest, make you secure. Clear your uncle out of the way forever. Just think of it. Nothing ever to fear from him again. It's the cleanest way. If you fail, of course—but need I go into that? There's security one way, and the other—you can guess. Your common sense will tell you what to do. I will be here at this address at ten to-night. By half-past ten I shall be gone. Bring the money here then; I'll do the rest. At ten to-night; eleven Furnes Terrace—off Baker Street. Got it? Burn that letter; it should never have been kept.'

'Ten to-night, eleven Furnes Terrace, Baker Street,' Marr's choking voice repeated. 'For pity's sake, think of another way. Are you there?'

'There is no other way. Don't upset yourself so; there's nothing in it. At ten I shall be waiting. Don't forget. Burn the letter, now.' Stone hung up the receiver before there was time for a reply. He laughed. Marr was broken. He would come; he would come with the money. Security

was an irresistible bait to one so weak. What a heaven-sent stroke of luck that letter of Grouchy's had been! Three thousand, and then flight! He laughed again, uproariously. He would show Grouchy a clean pair of heels. And he would back himself to elude his pursuers once he was well away.

Confidence was again in flood. Stone was examining a Continental Bradshaw when Snobbit came tramping heavily down the stairs, dragging behind him a large portmanteau that bulged with the odds and ends of his possessions. As Snobbit passed, he poked his head into the sitting-room where Stone sat glancing through the list of London to Paris trains, softly whistling a few catchy bars from the latest Gaiety show. Stone looked up and smiled.

'So long!'

'We shall be waiting for you over the other side,' Snobbit said savagely; 'and we'll split the swag when you arrive. Or, if you hang on here and hang, we'll know how to get it without your signature!' He grinned meaningly and withdrew his head. But then, as if his conscience pricked him at the thought of such deliberate desertion, he came back right into the room and said persuasively: 'Look 'ere, let's face facts. Come along with me, Silky; I'll wait until this evening for you if you'll change your mind. You're only putting your head into a noose, stopping here; you can't do anything alone.'

'Perhaps not,' Stone replied airily. 'But perhaps I may. And what I win alone is mine wholly.'

Snobbit persevered. 'You're 'ankering after that three thousand still, I suppose. You're welcome to that if you can get it. But you can't—too risky. Besides, it's not worth it; we've got enough to satisfy us and whole skins into the bargain. What's the use of another three thousand if you get a six-foot drop with it?'

'If I get it at all,' Stone replied, 'it will be without the penalty. If there were the slightest danger, my dear Angelo, I would not try. You insist there is danger everywhere, and in consequence you have decided to go. Very well. I cannot hold you here by force. It is a free country and I am bound, at least, to treat you as a rational being. However, I take a different view. In my opinion, the position was always less dangerous than it appeared to you, and quite lately it has taken a turn for the better. In one direction it is no longer dangerous at all. So I shall remain, my dear Angelo. You see—' He shrugged his shoulders. 'But it is idle for me to continue. I have already attempted more than once to explain the major points of the situation and not met with the faintest glimmer of understanding.'

'I understand this,' Snobbit cried indignantly, 'and I don't want to understand nothing more' —Stone sighed sadly at the grammar—'Violet Langton's dead. Call it suicide if you like, but it's Grouchy as 'as made her do it.' Stone winced. 'Now, I suppose, he's after Marr—and you.'

'He is,' Stone drawled.

'There you are! Well, mark my words: You'll both go the same way as Violet Langton—or

worse. I'm not stopping to hold your hands; don't want anything to do with either of you just now. Marr can keep his three thousand as far as I'm concerned, I'll keep an 'ole skin.' He turned away. 'So long; shan't see you again. Sure as fate you'll be dead directly, one way or another!'

'And surer than fate you fail to frighten me. Nevertheless, I must admit, my dear Angelo, that at times you can be marvellously persuasive. There always appears to be a provoking amount of shrewd common sense in what you say.' A smile hovered on Snobbit's lips. 'That, of course, is an illusion. But it might be dangerously compelling, none the less, were it not for the balancing sense of repulsion created by your lack of respect for aitches.' Snobbit marched fuming to the door. 'One moment, my dear Angelo!' Snobbit halted, but remained standing with his back turned on Stone. 'I was nearly forgetting something of extreme importance. There is a small matter you might attend to in Paris for me. I shall require a bedroom there to-morrow night.'

Snobbit turned and gazed sneeringly at Stone. 'So it's all bluff after all! For all your pretty talk, you've got the wind up, too!'

'Oh, dear me, no,' said Stone. 'Don't run away with that idea. But I have just had some news, news of the first importance. I should have told you before; indeed I tried to once, but you so distracted my attention from this all-important, absorbing item of information by the recitation of your gloomy doubts and fears arising out of

that humdrum suicide that it escaped my memory for the moment. However, in short, the news is this: Grouchy has opened his attack on Marr!'

'That's stale,' said Snobbit sullenly.

'We suspected it, but now I know for certain. Thus the lurking fear that Grouchy might be using that weak-minded young man as a bait to catch me is entirely removed. Grouchy evidently flatters himself that he can lay me by the heels in his own time and by his own unaided devices. Poor Grouchy!' Stone smiled insolently.

'But how does all this help?' Snobbit asked, quite mystified but more willing now, before Stone's show of confidence, to listen and to learn.

'Help?' answered Stone. 'Help, did I hear you say? My dear Angelo, it is self-evident. It leaves me free to join you in Paris to-morrow.'

'I daresay; but that's no answer to my question.'

'Listen, then. It helps in this way. It tells me first that I can approach Marr with impunity, without the slightest fear of a trap. Everything else is simplicity itself. I have discovered also that Marr is ignorant of Grouchy's escape. He believes, in fact, that his dear uncle is still safely in my custody and that it has been I, and not Grouchy parading under my name, who has lately been attracting so much of the attention of the public and police. Furthermore, he believes, foolishly enough, that I am hard-pressed or sufficiently hard-pressed to deem it wise to fly the country immediately. The reasons that have led the young man to harbour such ridiculous notions would

take too long to explain. Suffice it to say that he does harbour them, and in consequence I find myself in the strong strategical position of being able to say to him: "I am going. I cannot take your uncle with me, and if I leave him behind he will easily free himself from the prison from where he lies. There is only one hope for you. If you pay me the last three thousand by ten o'clock to-night, I will kill your dear uncle before I go. That will secure you. But fail, and I will leave him untouched, and presently he will be free. And he knows everything!" I have just been talking to Marr on the phone and offered him these terms. Pretty idea, isn't it? He is rather upset; seems to think I have let him down. What ingratitude! But he will get over that. I know him; he will take the line of least resistance and pay to-night. I rely upon it confidently. So you see, I will be able to join you with a clean balance-sheet—no outstanding debtors—in Paris to-morrow.'

Snobbit grinned. This was the sort of talk he was used to from Stone, and could understand. 'Good for you, Silky,' he said. 'I suspected you had something up your sleeve from the way you were going on. But now what's your plan? When you've got the three thousand, how are you going to carry out your part of the bargain and get rid of Grouchy, if you don't even know where he is?'

'Get rid of him!' Stone cried in a tone of horror. 'Get rid—you mean kill him? What an idea! Poor Grouchy! How matter-of-fact you are, my dear Angelo. I bear him no ill-will; I would be loath to harm a hair of his wise old

head. No, I will leave him free to deal with his disloyal nephew in such manner as he may think fit. Why should I trouble about Grouchy once I have the cash? For my part, I shall let bygones be bygones. That is the only Christian attitude to adopt. Maybe Grouchy himself will feel disinclined to let the matter drop so easily; he has a hard, unforgiving nature. He will find it disconcertingly difficult to explain away his late activities in a manner acceptable to society. But that is a difficulty he put in his own path; I shall place no further obstacles in his way. I'll wash my hands of the whole concern. To-morrow I will be in Paris. It would take twenty Grouchys to find me once I have gone.'

'So it all comes to this,' said Snobbit, after prolonged thought: 'you'll have one more go at squeezing Marr and 'ook it immediately afterwards.'

'Exactly. To-night I shall see Marr. He will be here at ten. To-morrow I will follow you to France.'

'Wouldn't you like me to stop and help?' asked Snobbit, now again filled with unquestioning confidence by Stone's show of certainty, and anxious to establish his claim to a share in the booty.

'No; you would be more useful to me abroad, preparing for my comfort on arrival. It does not take two to manage Marr. But postpone your voyage until the evening boat, so that you can pack up and take with you all our little knick-knacks here—mine as well as yours. You can do that easily in an hour or two. Take everything

that belongs to us—I have noticed nothing else in the house that is worth the labour of removing. The offensive woman who let us this dismal place will, I fear, go without her rent; but from the first I felt disinclined to pay it; the furniture is impossible, the general discomfort has been excessive.'

Snobbit grinned broadly at the last remark. It was a joke such as he could appreciate to the full.

'Right, Silky; I'll go and get our things together. Fancy an 'ouse with our own belongings the only ones worth taking! Ha! ha!'

Stone stamped his foot. 'House! House! House! Observe the aitch,' he cried after Snobbit's retreating figure.

CHAPTER XIX

A LAWYER'S QUIBBLE PLACES HIM IN A DANGEROUS POSITION

EARLY the same morning that Stone and Snobbit spent in fruitlessly disputing the results of Violet Langton's suicide, Benyon arrived at his office at Lincoln's Inn. It was his custom to begin the day's work with a brief glance through the morning paper. He did not depart from it that morning. But the result was unusual. Had any one walked into his room a little while later, he would have seen Benyon sitting at his desk, his head resting heavily upon his hands, his brow deeply puckered in thought, staring straight before him, far away beyond the massive, book-lined shelves that marked the limits of his range of actual vision. Spread out on a desk beneath his elbows lay the morning paper, that page uppermost which detailed the latest news of the ' Mystery of the man with the scar.'

Until that morning, Benyon had read nothing about the case, merely glancing at the headlines and turning over the page with a shiver and the thought: ' Another murder or something I suppose. Glad I'm not mixed up with criminal work.' But this morning the heading, ' The mystery of the man with the scar,' had vaguely stirred some

memory in his mind. 'Scar,' he thought. 'Where have I seen a scar lately?' He read the late reports of the case casually. Presently he looked up and laughed, thinking: 'How stupid! Scar! Cormack, of course,' and turned over the page. 'How stupid!'

But no sooner had Benyon turned the page than he suddenly became solemn-faced, turned it back and fell to studying the reports more intently. A few minutes afterwards he had called for the office file of the back numbers and read them too with ever-growing attention. Now he sat brooding.

'It must be so,' he argued silently. 'And yet it is incredible, impossible! . . . But the scar, curving by the roots of the hair! I saw it, plainly; even remarked upon it to his face! He brushed the question aside. Yes, didn't want to answer. . . . And that is only item number one. Two: the beard! . . . Thought at the time there was something amiss with that too. Would have mentioned that also if it hadn't been for his forbidding temper. . . . I see it now; it was false! It's only those fools in the press who've discredited the hairdresser's story merely because he hasn't been seen wearing a false beard and moustache at any time since. But that's no proof—naturally he hasn't. Those whiskers were only meant to deceive me, whilst outside he would be parading unrecognised as this non-existent John Stone. So that I should never suspect! . . . Coincidence? No, not even if that were all there was. But it isn't. Item three: his behaviour, his secrecy when he was here. All in line. His wish that

his return or survival should remain secret. . . . Items four, five, and six: his height, description—everything. No, there's no reasonable doubt. Cormack, my friend, you are masquerading under the name of John Stone. You may be able to fool the public, but you can't deceive me. You are John Stone, that is as certain as the day. But why—why? Question after question surged up in Benyon's mind. Why had Cormack disappeared? Why had he returned? Why had he been masquerading like this? What lay behind it all? What could Cormack have to do with the Langtons or the Vanes? And what now? What next? God alone knew! Cormack had persecuted Violet Langton—why? What had he been aiming at? Violet Langton had committed suicide—as the direct result of what Cormack had done! Why? Had that been . . .? Benyon rose suddenly at the horror of the half-formed thought. 'Cormack's object!' He paced anxiously up and down the room, seeking desperately to reject the thought that would not be denied. But suddenly he found relief from its insistence in another thought that came and demanded immediate investigation. He rushed back to his desk and reread all that he could find about the mystery.

'What about Hubert?' he was asking himself. 'His behaviour! The money!' Perhaps Hubert had known all along that the name, John Stone, shrouded the true one, Cormack Grouchy. 'Perhaps Hubert can explain the meaning of all that has passed.' Benyon cast his mind back, reviewing the past events, as he knew them, in the light of this new idea. Certainly, it looked as though

there might be some substance in it. Everything fitted in. At the time of Cormack's disappearance, Hubert had behaved oddly. He had appeared excited, frightened, nervy, sometimes even furtive, as though he had had something to conceal. He had not exhibited that purely leaden heaviness which usually settles upon those touched by a great tragedy. At the time Benyon had put the curious condition down to the shock of the whole terrible affair upon Hubert's tainted blood—he had always been a queer, excitable sort of chap; one never quite knew how anything would affect him. Perhaps that first opinion would now have to be revised. The rest which Hubert had been ordered had done him no good; if anything he was more jumpy and irritable now than he had been at first, and perhaps a shade more furtive in his expression. And above all, during the last few days, so Benyon had heard, Hubert had become noticeably worse. Only yesterday, as being in some sort Hubert's guardian, Benyon had been urgently pressed by a mutual friend to seek the best advice obtainable. This augmentation of Hubert's trouble had synchronised with Cormack's return and public activities under the name of John Stone. Strange! Was this, too, mere coincidence? It might be. But it might also be evidence that Hubert knew or, at the very least, had a strong suspicion of the real identity of Stone. Perhaps he had known all along exactly what was going on, and had been frightened, was now almost terrified, but for some reason dared not confide in any one. What was there to put against this evidence of Hubert's knowledge and, perhaps,

complicity? Certainly Cormack had made him, Benyon, swear to keep the knowledge of his return secret, secret from every one, even from Hubert. He could almost remember Cormack's exact words. But such an injunction might have been intended to serve another purpose. Like the false beard, it might have been merely a further attempt on Cormack's part to hoodwink him, make him believe that though Cormack in fact lived on as of old, no one, not even Hubert, knew, and thus to preclude Hubert, in Benyon's mind, as a possible source of information. Benyon shook his head. There was not much weight in the evidence of the lack of Hubert's knowledge—and it was more capable of bearing a contrary interpretation. The evidence that Hubert knew was infinitely stronger.

Another thought suddenly struck Benyon, and, thumping his fist hard down on the desk, he exclaimed aloud: 'That proves it!' Revelation was fast succeeding revelation. The pieces were slowly forming themselves into a complete picture! A question at a tangent to Benyon's main line of thought had suddenly, for no reason, framed itself in his mind; and it was the obvious answer to that that seemed to confirm his suspicions. How had Cormack managed to find the means to live during the period of his total disappearance? The answer was simple, glaringly obvious, and overwhelmingly strong in its implication of Hubert. Cormack must have been expending considerable sums; for it was public property that the so-called John Stone had been occupying—and not alone—a large house in

Oxfordshire, and had been solely responsible for its upkeep, a responsibility which had been properly discharged until the last few weeks. The upkeep of that house can have been but one of many of Stone's expenses. . . . But he himself, as Cormack's executor, had had control of his old friend's funds in their entirety since the day of Cormack's assumed death in January. The only sums paid out of those funds thereafter had been to Hubert. Moreover, he knew that Cormack had withdrawn no considerable sum from his bank account immediately prior to his disappearance. Yet Stone, or Cormack Grouchy—it mattered not under which name he went—had had money to spend. Whence had he obtained it? The only possible answer was, from Hubert! Things were becoming clearer. Had Hubert had enough to meet Cormack's requirements? Yes. Benyon recalled Hubert's story of debts to moneylenders; Hubert had wanted nine thousand pounds to settle them. That had been a cock-and-bull story; the money must all have gone to Cormack. It was obvious now. That money had been raised almost immediately after Cormack's disappearance and paid away by Hubert secretly. The concealment of the name of the creditor, the payment of the debt in cash—it had all been part and parcel of the same grand deception. Hubert had been raising money at precisely the same time as Cormack had been receiving large sums from an unknown source. Two and two make four. It was as clear as daylight. Cormack had received that nine thousand pounds and therewith conducted his unintelligible operations. . . . And that appar-

ently had not been enough. Hubert lately had been striving to obtain a further three thousand. For Cormack, too? Obviously: witness the tale of the debts Stone had left behind in Oxfordshire; Cormack had been in urgent need of further funds. Hubert would have supplied them. . . . But then something had happened, some mishap or miscalculation had upset Cormack's plans—perhaps the fact that the strange, obscure episode of the professor had suddenly brought the mysterious John Stone out into the limelight. Cormack, fearing then how much might come out, had cleared from that neighbourhood, and, hastening to London, had come to see him, Benyon. Here he had clumsily endeavoured to dissociate himself from the unknown John Stone, and Hubert from all knowledge of his own existence, lest any suspicions might later be aroused in Benyon's mind. At the same time, he had made careful inquiries about Hubert—no doubt to assure himself that Benyon knew nothing, and that Hubert had been faithfully guarding his secrets. For the purpose of carrying on such deception, and dissociating Hubert from all connection with the affair, Cormack had stopped his own source of income through Hubert. Consequently he had been compelled himself to obtain a little money to go on with. He had taken fifty pounds, intending, no doubt, to come back for more; later, when things were quieter. . . . But he had not been back. The reason for that was not far to seek. He dared not. Instead of things becoming quieter, his escapades had captured the public interest. The scar on Cormack's forehead was

now renowned. And doubtless he remembered that Benyon had noticed, had even remarked upon it. No, Cormack had not been successful in his efforts to move secretly; public curiosity had spread like a forest fire. . . .

Thus two facts emerged quite clearly, or so it seemed to Benyon: the name and description of John Stone concealed the true identity of Cormack Grouchy; and Hubert Marr knew all about it, had indeed been in touch with Cormack throughout, providing him with funds. Beyond those two indisputable facts Benyon would not go. The rest would all be bare conjecture and his legal mind shunned anything so nebulous. It was impossible to deduce the whys and wherefores of Cormack's actions, there was nothing to build on. . . .

Even the papers had become more reticent today, not caring to risk being again proved so absurdly wrong in their surmises. They contented themselves now with pretending to know more than they said. They hinted ominously that there were concealed behind the activities of John Stone far deeper mysteries than were yet guessed at by the public; some even hinted that they knew what these mysteries were, but that, for reasons unstated, the time for their publication had not yet arrived. Why, they asked, did Violet Langton commit suicide, and who had been interested in disposing secretly of a packing-case which contained no more than potatoes and dead rabbits? They could tell their readers, and they would directly—but not just now. Violet Langton and others, unnamed, they asserted, had, like the pub-

lic and the police, and even the Press at first, been hoodwinked into believing that the packing-case contained the dead body of the old man which had temporarily been hidden from view in Seaford mortuary. These unnamed persons had thought they had been disposing of that. Why had they wanted to hide it? Whence came that unknown body? Who was Henry Birkett? They, the omniscient journalists, would answer all these questions in due time. At present they would only make a suggestion: the grave of Meyrick Vane should be opened to discover whether, in fact, it did contain a body at all. That was all they were at liberty to say at the moment.

These questions, which the Press could not—saying they would not—answer, puzzled Benyon no less than they did every one else. He was at a loss even to guess at their explanation. But being wiser and more guarded than most, he did not try. He firmly grasped the only two facts that appeared to him indisputable: Stone was Cormack, and Hubert knew; and left it at that, turning his thoughts to what he ought to do in view of those startling discoveries.

One thing was clear to him. Cormack had been acting in a way that could have neither moral nor legal justification. That Cormack was mad he utterly declined to believe; he had seen him and spoken to him only the other day, since all these troubles had begun. But he also refused to believe that Cormack had a valid motive for his acts, a motive that, once the full facts were known, would or could be regarded by public opinion as sufficient sanction. He knew the strength and

weakness of Cormack's character. Cormack went his own way, reckoning neither right nor wrong nor cost. He had a motive, and a strong motive, no doubt, but one nevertheless that could not justify his deeds.

Thus, to Benyon's careful soul, a duty loomed ahead, imperative. He must see Cormack and dissuade him from the further prosecution of his wild purposes, whatever they might be. He was the only man in the world whose word on right or wrong went with Grouchy, to whose opinions Grouchy was willing to listen submissively. It would not be easy. He knew him, understood his temperament well. Grouchy was a man not easily moved, still less easily turned away from a path he had once begun to tread. And Grouchy, he fully realised, must have been desperately, deeply stirred to be going the way he was. It would be a tough job to make Cormack see reason, to turn him back into the ways of common sense. But it was a job which only he could do, and a job which would have to be begun at once: for who knew how far Cormack might not have gone by to-morrow? Already he had travelled far. Benyon rose from his desk. He must see Cormack, and at once.

With that determination only in his mind, forgetful of all else, he crossed the room, opened a long cupboard which stood in one corner, and drew out his hat and coat. But before he had put them on he laughed softly and replaced them. He, too, was beginning to lose his senses in the distraction of that awful affair of Cormack's. How could he go and exercise his powers of

suasion upon Cormack if he didn't even know where to find him?

Benyon returned to his desk, feeling sadly helpless. He must see Cormack at once. But how? Perhaps Cormack would be coming back some time for further supplies of cash. Perhaps—in a day or two. But matters were far too desperately urgent already. He couldn't wait upon events. Besides, Cormack might not come back himself, he might send Hubert again. . . .

'Lord, how stupid I am becoming, forgetting everything,' Benyon murmured, as Hubert returned to his thoughts, and, with the name, the memory of what he himself had so lately proved to his complete satisfaction: Hubert knew all about Cormack being Stone, had been in touch with him, providing him with funds. 'He will know. I can find out Cormack's hiding-place from him,' he thought.

Again Benyon approached the corner cupboard. But again he returned to his desk without his hat and coat. There was another difficulty in the way; he had sworn to Cormack to tell no one, not even Hubert, of Cormack's return. The object in Cormack's mind when that promise had been extracted had probably only been to deceive. That couldn't have much binding effect now that Benyon knew. But still, a promise it remained; and it might well be that Cormack had some other and more obscure intention. Benyon's plain, honest nature did not relish the prospect of being so flatly false to his word. Yet his promise would have to be broken. The position was too serious to be jeopardised by a consideration such as that.

Under the circumstances it was justifiable, his disinclination was a small matter. . . . 'Or—wait a bit—I might do that,' he murmured, and smiled contentedly as a possible way of surmounting this new difficulty suddenly occurred to him. True, it was only a quibble; but he was a lawyer and it comforted him greatly. He had promised Cormack to tell no one of his, Cormack's survival, but he had given no such promise and was absolutely free to discuss this other man, this Stone. And that would serve the same purpose if Hubert knew the identity concealed under the latter name. Cormack could be made the subject of a cross-examination of Hubert without any terrible qualms of conscience afflicting Benyon's precise spirit; the breach of his promise would not be too flagrant. He would talk to Marr only about a man named John Stone.

Twice more Benyon rose from his chair to go out and see Hubert Marr. Twice more he returned his hat and coat to their pegs and sat down again to puzzle out the exact manner of his approach to the delicate interview. It would be far from plain sailing. He would have to take extreme precautions against antagonizing or otherwise upsetting Hubert in his present neurotic condition. The success of his mission hinged upon Hubert's willingness to help. And failure might spell ruin for more lives than one.

At last, after long and careful deliberation, Benyon ordered a taxi to be fetched, and a few minutes later was driving to Hubert's house in Essex Square.

'Mr. Hubert was in. Up in the study, tele-

phoning '— so Benyon was informed on arrival by Norris, the old butler, who had once been Grouchy's faithful and favoured servant. The portly old man volunteered some further information, as he took Benyon's hat and coat. His master seemed less well to-day. He was glad, for that reason, that Mr. Benyon had called this morning; he himself had been contemplating the advisability of requesting him to do so. Mr. Hubert was a terrible responsibility just now, seemed really to need watching, so to speak, all the time. But Mr. Hubert, in his present mood, was inclined to resent such attention, however respectful. Perhaps Mr. Benyon could soothe him. . . .

Benyon nodded his appreciation and dismissed the kindly old man, saying that he would go straight up and announce himself; and that he would make a point of speaking to Norris again before he went, to say how he had found the master of the house, and confer as to what should be done.

As Benyon approached the door of the study he could hear Hubert's voice speaking quickly, but indistinctly, inside the room. He hesitated a moment at the door to collect his thoughts and compose his features for the ticklish interview. Hubert was in the mood for resenting the slightest interference, so Norris had hinted. It would be delicate work. . . . He gently turned the handle and swung the heavy door open.

Hubert Marr was standing, back to the door, at the far end of the room by a low bookcase, upon the top of which rested the telephone. With

one hand he held the receiver tightly to his ear, in the other he grasped a large sheet of notepaper which rustled slightly against his leg as the hand which held it twitched and shook. Suddenly, whoever was speaking at the other end ceased and Marr himself cried in a trembling voice: 'Ten, to-night. Eleven Furnes Terrace, Baker Street. . . . For pity's sake think of some other way. . . . Are you there?'

For a brief moment Marr listened for a reply, then in a more piteous voice still he cried: 'Are you there? Are you there? There must be another way. Do you hear? . . .' He listened, and rattled the receiver holder, wildly. 'Are you there? . . .' He listened for a moment longer, then, muttering the one word, 'Gone!' hung up the receiver, walked unsteadily to the fire, bent down, and cast the letter he held upon the flames.

'Gone!' he repeated softly as he watched it flare away and uttered a curious little laugh.

Benyon, standing in the doorway, his hand rigidly clasping the door-handle, watched Marr closely. 'Eleven Furnes Terrace, Baker Street,' he thought. 'That's probably the address I've come for. . . . Poor boy! poor boy! Worse even than Norris led me to expect. . . . It's all Cormack's doing. Wicked! . . . Must know what he's doing. He's driving the lad clean out of his senses. The poor boy was never built to stand nervous tension of this sort. . . . And I warned Cormack. Another shock, I said. . . . Now look what he's doing. Still using him, breaking him. . . . Oh, Cormack, what can be worth it?' . . . He stood contemplating with deeply sympathetic

eyes the poor nerve-ridden wreck standing on the far side of the room, ignorant of his presence, and shivering even before the bright fire.

But suddenly realising what in his distress he had forgotten, that he was, in fact though not intentionally, playing the part of an eavesdropper and that his presence was still unobserved, Benyon withdrew his hand from the door-handle, releasing the spring. The bolt clicked sharply back to rest. Benyon advanced into the room.

At the sound of the slight movement Marr spun round. His eyes were staring and his mouth was loose-lipped and quivering. For a moment Benyon thought he was about to give way to tears, but, instead, he dropped his arms feebly to his sides, uttered a half-chuckle, half-cry, and after a moment said vaguely, as though still speaking to himself:

'Listening! It doesn't make any difference. They all know.'

'I'm sorry, Hubert,' Benyon said gently. 'I couldn't help hearing a little—some address near Baker Street, that's all. I've only just this moment come. I didn't intentionally—'

'What will they do now, I wonder?' Marr broke in, as though Benyon had not spoken. And he laughed foolishly again.

Benyon went up to him, took him gently by the arm, and coaxed him into an easy-chair.

'Rest a little,' he said quietly. 'Don't take it like this. Poor boy!' He patted his shoulder. 'You're worrying too much, you know. That's why I came. I want to have a quiet talk with you —get it off your mind.'

For a little while Marr sat in silence, clasping his head in his hands. But suddenly he looked up and asked:

'Why did you come here?'

'Exactly. Why? I'll tell you.' Benyon paused, wondering whether he could risk breaking the object of his visit immediately. At length he said: 'I want to talk things over with you, Hubert. Can you guess what it is about? Come, I'll speak plainly and you will be frank with me, I know. I'm your friend, Hubert; you know you can trust me. I want to try and help you—help *both* of you.' He paused. 'There—that's what I've come to discuss. *Both!* You know who I mean. You and—and John Stone.'

Marr did not flinch at the name. He was murmuring quietly to himself. Benyon twice thought he caught the words 'three thousand'; and more distinctly an oft-repeated phrase that ended sometimes with 'let him go,' sometimes with 'dead,' amongst a jumble of less audible words. He leant over the back of Marr's chair, laid his hand gently upon the young man's shoulder and said:

'Listen. We'll make it all come right. Don't you worry. Don't worry. Let's talk it over quietly, soberly—you and I. I can guess what is passing in your mind. Believe that I only want to help.'

Marr remained motionless. He hardly appeared to have understood; he might not even have heard. Benyon came round from behind and seated himself on the arm of Marr's chair, repeating: 'Let's talk it over together.'

Marr looked up at him and edged away a little.

Presently he asked: 'What do you want with me?'

'Only one little thing. I want you to take me to see him,' Benyon answered slowly. 'You see, I know all about it, guessed it all by simply putting two and two together—we have to be able to do that in my profession. And, now, I want to go with you to see—to see John Stone. That's all I ask. I want to help you both. You'll take me, won't you?'

Marr said nothing.

'Come. I'm not not asking you to tell me much. I know everything else I want to know, except his address. The address I heard—eleven Furnes Terrace, Baker Street—was that it?'

Marr nodded, solemnly repeated the address, then, shaking his head, added impersonally: 'It doesn't matter. Every one knows now.'

'I don't think so,' said Benyon reassuringly. 'I doubt if there is another soul in the world besides myself who has guessed even a fraction of the truth. That's why I've come round now. I want you to take me to see him at once; before it is too late. There is still time, I think, to find a way out. If only you will both listen to me. . . . Suppose we both go and see him now?'

Marr broke the silence with another strange little laugh, and then, as though stating an opinion which after careful consideration he had just formed, said abruptly: 'The three thousand—he says he must have that to-night. I'll go and get it now.'

'Don't you worry,' said Benyon soothingly; 'I will see to that. He shall have it.' Evidently,

thought Benyon, that was what Cormack—if indeed it had been Cormack—had been telephoning to Hubert about, telling him probably that he himself dared not at the moment show his face, and that Hubert would have to get the money for him out of Benyon. 'There must be another way,' Benyon had distinctly heard Hubert cry into the telephone, and 'For pity's sake!' Poor Hubert! He didn't want to be dragged back into that again. Judging from the effect the whole affair had had upon him already, Hubert had only been an unwilling accomplice from the beginning. . . .

'He shall have it,' Benyon repeated softly. 'Don't you worry. Leave it all to me. . . . But maybe he won't want it after I have had a talk with him.'

'To be paid by ten to-night or—or else—' Marr covered his face with his hands and shivered violently.

'It shall be; I promise,' Benyon broke in. 'It shall be. By ten to-night. Don't let it worry you, there's a good chap. I'll go and draw it presently—in plenty of time. Come, come!' He caressed the back of Marr's drooping head. 'Listen, old fellow; this is how we will manage things. I'll come with you to-night and—yes, that would be the best way—I'll wait outside while you go in first, alone. You'll break it to him gently that I'm outside with the money, and that I know everything; persuade him to see me. Insist. He will, I'm sure; he almost must.'

Marr was still again, but his lips were moving faintly. Benyon patted the back of his head gently.

'You understand?' he asked.

Marr nodded.

Benyon looked down at him sadly, and shook his head. 'Poor boy!' he murmured. 'You didn't want to do it, I know. But it will come all right.'

He doubted whether Hubert had understood, doubted whether he had even heard; but it was better not to tax him too highly just now. Obviously, Hubert's nerves and mind had been utterly unable to withstand the strain of the last few weeks, only a dim uneven flicker of intelligence seemed to have survived. It would be better to leave him now and say no more. Benyon got up.

'I'll call for you shortly after nine,' he said. 'Then we'll go along together.'

Marr looked up, and Benyon noticed with intense relief that he was smiling. Looking calmer now! Benyon turned slowly away. But as he passed out of the room a strange little laugh floated after him. He hesitated for a moment just outside the door. No further sound came. He closed the door behind him and walked grimly on.

At the sound of the closing door Marr turned round, looked vaguely here and there and eventually asked: 'Who's that?' He waited a moment for a reply which did not come. Then, in the memory of something else, he seemed to forget that he had ever asked a question, for he rose, went to the fire and poked it vigorously, muttering: 'Burn up! Burn up at once!' Presently he returned to his chair and all was still again.

Downstairs Benyon, on his way out, was having a brief consultation with Norris.

'Certainly, he is no better,' Benyon said, gravely shaking his head. 'Don't let any one see him or bother him to-day. Meanwhile, I'll see what can be done for him. I'll probably make arrangements for the specialist to see him again to-morrow morning. And this evening I'll come round about nine o'clock and take him to spend the evening with me in my rooms. A quiet talk might soothe him; and, anyway, it will enable me to learn his particular symptoms. I shall then be in a better position to talk to the specialist. Until then just keep him quiet.'

'Yes, sir; I'll see that no one troubles him until you come. I'm very sorry you find him so bad; but I was afraid you would, sir. I'm glad you called. I feel so responsible for him now he's alone—remembering how I've looked after him since he was a child. Ever since that awful day the master was lost he's been like this, sir. Here I've been telling every one: "Yes, he's a little better to-day," and trying to believe it myself, but knowing he's always a little worse. It's a sad time looking after him just now.' The old man's eyes were glistening.

Benyon smiled his appreciation. 'He's lucky to have you, Norris,' he said. 'No one could be served more patiently or well.'

The comfortable, shining flesh round Norris's mouth quivered slightly as he replied: 'Thank you, sir. I only do my best. . . .'

'And what more is possible? . . . Well, I'll

be back again about nine this evening.' Keep him quiet.'

Norris looked gratefully after Benyon's departing figure.

CHAPTER XX

LIKE MOTHS THAT HASTEN TO THE DEADLY FLAME

And even the names of Benyon, Stone, Snobbit, and Hubert Marr—unless he was beyond it—did not exhaust the list of the chief actors in the ' Man with the scar mystery ' who were doing some hard thinking on that morning immediately following the night when Violet Langton died. If possible, Grouchy was even more afflicted than they by harassing thoughts. For a long, long time he might have been seen that morning pacing anxiously up and down the small sitting-room of his lodgings, a weary, drawn expression on his face. In the paper that lay on his breakfast-table the news which had first met his eager gaze was the glaring headline: ' Suicide of the Honourable Mrs. Langton.' He had thrust the paper away from him quickly as though it was a thing contaminated, and read no more. It had been a rude shock. When he had recovered from his first dismay and could think more calmly, he tried to classify his sensations.

A conclusion such as this, he was forced to admit, was almost exactly what he had been striving for, except, perhaps, that it had come unexpectedly soon. But it had been well-nigh inevitable, sooner or later; tragedy had been the logical

result and the desired outcome of his late activities. Yet, somehow, now that his first victim was dead, had in fact been killed by his hand, he fell to wondering whether this was really what he had sought to achieve; and whether, now that he had achieved it, it satisfied his deep longing for revenge. The sudden, utter finality of it all had brought him up with a jolt. He was shaken; certain now on one point only, that the fate which Violet Langton had suffered had been no worse than she had deserved. He felt no pity for her. He was glad her punishment had been no lighter.

None the less, Grouchy was ill at ease. Events had taken an irretrievable turn now; there could be no going back on death. That thought was discomforting, frightening. He began to ask himself questions which he should have put to himself a few days before. By what right had he ordained himself the avenger of the wrongs of Vane? —or, for that matter, of himself? He was weighted down by disconcerting doubts as to the security of his moral position; and the accompanying feeling of emptiness and uncertainty was strange to him. He had executed man's justice —or was it his own individual justice?—upon Violet Langton; and he was about to bring the same force to bear on others. He had tortured, he had killed in the demand that the debt of agony should be paid in full. 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth!' He remembered thinking that. He had usurped the thrones of justice both of God and of the State. Was he himself now any better than a murderer in the eyes of both? He had

been urged on by his own primitive instincts. Arguing that the crimes he had set himself to avenge had been so great that the old time-honoured retributive procedure of trial and swift, painless death were not enough, he had gone his own way. He could still feel the weight of that argument. But now Violet Langton was dead, and he had killed her. . . . And so with Marr and Stone directly. . . . But gratification of primitive instincts had brought no solace to his mind. This had been a barren victory. Violet Langton had suffered, she had endured the terror of the hunted, she had been driven to death. But what of that now that she was dead? Her agony had only been for a brief second of time.

An overpowering sense of emptiness surrounded Grouchy. The abrupt shock of the news of death had thrown him into that curious and rare mental state when a man can dissociate his individuality from himself and review his own impulses, his own impetuous acts, as dispassionately as an unconcerned observer. And Grouchy, thus looking at himself, found that other Grouchy sadly lacking. In the mirror of his mind he reviewed all that he had done since that memorable night of storm when he, that other Grouchy, had been plunged unwittingly into the sordid struggle. He watched his wholesome self-confidence turning slowly, as it was slowly crushed during those months of hopeless captivity, first into unforgiving hatred, and then into bitter self-sufficiency. He saw himself fight for his freedom, gain it, then hatch his monstrous revenge. And the incidents of the revenge itself! He shook his head. That man, that other

Grouchy, despite his provocation, was a common murderer or only a little better.

But it was too late to turn back now. Death had come and ruled its dividing line. Nothing writ before that could ever be erased. But the future remained; Grouchy's story was not yet complete. He had set himself the task of executing vengeance on three persons. Of the three, two only now remained. Had he the courage or the will to go on against them? Could he, if he would, now call a halt?

He tried to cast such doubts and fears from his mind, postponing the hour when he would have to face these vital questions which surged up and unceasingly hammered in his brain. He shook himself as though to free himself from their oppression, squared his shoulders and turned to the morning papers to read what followed that staggering headline. He read the remaining news almost without interest. All else seemed so utterly insignificant beside that one devastating fact of death.

But there was much that was fresh in that morning's paper. There was the tracing of the packing-case to Violet Langton's house and the swift discovery of its theft from there on the night immediately following its delivery. Then came the story of the young motor-cyclist—he had rushed early to the police—leading on to the end of the trail, the discovery by the police of the case lying deep in the water at the bottom of a disused gravel-pit somewhere in the North Downs. Next in sequence came the two items of news which at once depressed the reporters and startled

the public, because they so signally failed to tally with their expectations: Violet Langton's suicide upon hearing that the police had been informed where the packing-case was hidden; and the discovery later that the case contained no missing body, but only a sack of potatoes and a pair of reeking rabbits!

This last news, combined with the obvious fact that John Stone had, by acting in a manner exactly calculated to ensure it, been directly and deliberately responsible for the speedy discovery of the case might have led to the invention by the newspaper correspondents of new theories as to the nature of Stone's morbid mania or criminal insanity. Their old suggestion of an attempt to obtain money by threats was now hopelessly inadequate. Some deeper tragedy must be concealed behind these awful portents. But what it was, what Stone's hidden and dreadful purpose might be, or what exactly had driven Violet Langton to take her life, the reporters could not guess. Nor did they try. One and all they wisely kept silent, consoling themselves now with being 'first with the news,' and waited, hoping for further information that might throw more light upon the mystery.

Thus the papers, fearful of exercising their inventive powers, were driven to seek other means of filling their columns. 'The mystery of the man with the scar' became a scourge for the police. The Press was unanimous in their abuse of that long-suffering body. What was the use of them, they cried in unison, if they could not find Stone? He was the only man who knew all the ins and outs of the mystery. He could tell them the whole

truth, if only the police would stir themselves, follow up the teeming clues, and drag him out of his obscurity. . . . It was noticeable that the papers seemed now even to doubt whether Stone had been guilty of any misdeeds. They only suggested finding him for the purpose of gaining information about this baffling mystery, not in order to bring him to book. They had become strangely guarded, avoiding even the expression of an opinion by implication.

Grouchy read these reports without enthusiasm. His mood of introspection did not disappear. His doubts and fears increased in their persistence until they hung like a dark cloud over his troubled spirit. The shock of Violet Langton's death was not one that would soon wear off like the first astonishment produced by some equally awe inspiring but less irremediable event. Throughout the day he moved restlessly about his rooms, trying to force a conclusion between his warring selves and shake off the oppressive burden of conflicting thoughts. But the evening found him unrelieved, torn between the two beliefs: ' You have acted justly. They deserve their fate,' and, ' You are evil, a murderer! You cannot, dare not go on!'

When darkness came, Grouchy went out. Exercise and air, he hoped, would help him to stamp out the strife within. For a while he tramped the neighbouring streets aimlessly; but suddenly he stopped dead. A terrifying thought had struck him. Violet Langton had taken her own life. What of Hubert? Hubert's wits were going. He never had had the courage to face a dire emer-

gency. He was far weaker than Violet Langton. He, too, might kill himself. At this very moment he might be raising a fatal hand. He might be already dead! . . .

The thought staggered Grouchy. He had started this fatal, ghastly snowball rolling and now it had gathered such weight and impetus that he could no longer guide it. Hubert might take his life, might be already dead—and he, Grouchy, could do nothing. Hubert's blood, too, would be on his head! It was terrifying! 'Hubert must not die,' he thought. Not yet; not until he had had time to make up his mind. Yesterday he would have welcomed it, and to-morrow he might again; but not now. He was not prepared to have another death weighing on his soul. Hubert must live, a little longer at least; for he, Grouchy, was not ready, could not tell yet which of his two selves held the truth. But how, if Hubert were not dead already, to stay his hand? At all costs he must be saved a little longer. . . .

Grouchy found himself speeding along faster and faster in the direction of what was once his home, now Marr's, in Essex Square. As he sped through a dark narrow alley on the way he tore off his false moustache and beard, and stuffed them deep into his pocket. . . . He might have to do anything to find out whether Hubert lived. He might even have to go to the house itself on some pretext and inquire. Know he must. But it would not do for too perfect a counterpart of the old Grouchy to be seen loitering about that neighbourhood. That news alone, if it came to the ears of Hubert too suddenly, might be the

finishing touch. And Hubert must live. . . .

What he would do when he had gained the vital information Grouchy did not pause to consider. How he could stay Hubert's hand he did not know. Yet stayed it must be. When he turned the last corner into Essex Square, Grouchy was almost running and his face was moist with perspiration. But there he checked his pace and, crossing the road, proceeded more slowly along the narrow footpath that skirted the railings round the gardens in the middle of the square. It was a little darker there than on the main footpath against the houses where the street-lamps stood. He did not want to be seen yet if it could be helped.

Walking slowly, but with fast-beating heart, beside the garden railings, Grouchy came at length to a point from which he could see his old house a few doors along on the other side of the road. He stopped and peered nervously through the darkness. The house itself was brightly lighted, and a taxi stood against the curb under the street-lamp in front of it. He heaved a sigh of deep relief. That did not look like a house of the dead —there was too much light; and, besides—a taxi at the door—there must be some caller there. But that was not enough. If tragedy had not yet occurred, it still might—this very night, perhaps. He moved a little closer.

As he stood gazing across at the house, wondering vaguely what he could do, short of making a clean breast of everything, to make certain whether Hubert lived and, if he did, to delay a second tragedy, the door opened. There, clearly silhou-

etted against the square patch of brilliant light that welled out from the hall, he saw Hubert with another man—yes, Jim Benyon—standing close beside him. Something akin to a small cry of joy broke from Grouchy's lips. So Hubert, at the moment, was still alive!

They came out slowly, drifted down the few steps and reached the waiting taxi. Benyon was grimly holding Hubert's arm with the intention, it appeared to Grouchy, of affording him support rather than of resting his own weight upon the younger man.

The taxi driver leaned over in his seat and opened the door of the cab. Benyon helped Hubert to climb in. 'He's in a bad way,' Grouchy thought; 'I've only come just in time.'

When Hubert was safely seated in the cab, Benyon turned to the driver.

'Drive along Baker Street,' he said in clear tones, which in the still night air floated across to Grouchy, standing a few yards away. 'I'll tell you when to put us down.' Then he got in himself and the taxi moved away.

Grouchy followed it with his eyes until it turned the corner and passed out of view.

'That's better,' he murmured. 'Shaky, but alive! . . . And Benyon looking after him. He'll see that nothing happens to him just yet. He'll watch him closely while he's in that condition. That will give me time to think.' He turned away.

'Along Baker Street,' he mused as he trudged along. 'I wonder where they're off to? I don't remember any one who lives in that direction.

. . . Jim didn't seem familiar with the address himself or he would have told the driver. But still, that doesn't matter.' He sighed. 'So long as they're together he'll be safe—Baker Street or elsewhere. . . . Baker Street! Let's see, I was in Baker Street—' He suddenly stood stockstill, and in his deep voice almost shouted the solitary word: 'No!' And he glared about him, oblivious of a woman who, approaching along the pavement at that moment, stepped quickly on to the road to pass him, glancing nervously as she did so at the wild-eyed man standing there, rooted to the middle of the footpath.

'Not there! Impossible!' he went on aloud in agitated tones. 'Jim gone to see Stone! Not there! Jim can't be in it too! . . . But Baker Street! And why give no exact address? . . . My God! We'll see!' Grouchy rushed forward. Round the corner he came upon a small cab-rank that had its pitch in the centre of the road. Shouting 'Taxi!' wildly, he flung himself into the first he came to. A driver approached leisurely from the shelter a few yards away, poked his head through the open window of the cab and said: 'Not in 'ere, sir. Take 'em in order, please.' Out came Grouchy as precipitously as he had got in and plunged into the only other cab in front.

'Corner of Furnes Terrace—as quick as you can!' he cried to the taximan who was leaning idly against the radiator lighting his pipe. He sat in the cab cursing while the driver lit another match, then fiddled with the controls it seemed for a life-long age, before he managed to persuade

the aged engine to break into a spluttering uneven throb.

'Where did you say you wanted?' asked the driver, coming round and opening the door.

'Corner of Furnes Terrace. Off Baker Street. And quick!' Grouchy shouted in reply. 'We'll see!' he muttered grimly as the door was banged.

CHAPTER XXI

STONE DEAD

It was a little after half-past nine when Benyon and Marr, the latter firmly held and guided by the former's arm linked with his own, halted just short of the drab exterior of eleven Furnes Terrace. There Benyon broke the silence for the first time since they had left Essex Square.

'You know it all,' he whispered. 'Make him see me. The money is in my pocket—tell him that. I'll keep it until you call me in. Go on alone and break the news. I'll wait here.' He pushed Marr forwards. 'And tell him,' he said louder, 'it's no use his refusing. I'll dog his door-step until he lets me in. Go on.' He waved a hand in the direction of the door.

Marr stumbled on a little way and then stood still in front of the door, inanely, doing nothing.

'Ring! Knock!' said Benyon gesticulating.

The idea seemed to penetrate the young man's fuddled brain. He fumbled with the knocker and produced an uncertain noise.

Benyon, satisfied that the attention of those inside had been called to Marr's presence, turned and walked slowly away. He didn't want to be discovered just yet. Much as he hated sending Hubert in alone, it was probably the best thing to

do. It could hardly make Hubert any worse; and Hubert's condition would shock Cormack more deeply, bring him to his senses more quickly, if he saw him alone and could contemplate the ghastly havoc he had created with nothing and no one to distract him from that awful sight. Cormack would be more prepared to see Benyon after that and be more humble in his attitude towards the advice which he proposed to offer. True, it was extremely doubtful whether Hubert could appreciate or understand what was going on, still more improbable that he would deliver Benyon's message coherently. But that didn't matter—all the better. The important thing was for Cormack to see Hubert alone for a little while, and see what chaos he had made of Hubert's mind. When the sordid horror of it all and its moral had had time to sink into Cormack's stony heart, he, Benyon, would himself go and demand admittance at the door.

Benyon, walking slowly away, a moment later heard, behind him, the sound of the door of the house being opened in answer to Marr's summons. When it had been shut again with a resounding clang, he looked back to make sure that Hubert was safely inside. He heaved a sigh of relief when he saw that he was no longer standing on the doorstep. That was the first stage successfully accomplished! Cormack would now be studying Hubert's witless face, hating himself for the dreadful havoc he had caused. . . .

Benyon came back and took his stand against the railings which guarded the area in front of the house. There he waited patiently, only wan-

dering a few yards away to avoid exciting curiosity by appearing to loiter too suspiciously whenever an occasional passer-by came along the dingy street.

Presently a taxi drew up at the corner of the street, not far away. A man alighted and approached quickly along the pavement towards Benyon, glancing up at the numbers of the houses as he came. Benyon, as before, moved away. He crossed the road and walked slowly in the direction from which the stranger was advancing, so that he would not have to go far—he would be able to turn back immediately the stranger had passed the house. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched him hurrying along. As they passed on opposite sides of the road, something in the stranger's gait seemed vaguely familiar to Benyon. He wondered momentarily of whom it could remind him, and then dismissed it from his thoughts. Another stride or two and the man would have passed Cormack's house and he himself would be able to turn back and follow in the wake of the stranger, back to his sentry-post outside the house.

A moment later, glancing back to see if the way was clear, Benyon was astonished to find that the stranger himself had come to a sudden halt outside the door of Number Eleven.

'Some one else got business there?' Benyon wondered. 'It'll make things awkward if he wants to see Cormack too.' Then, suddenly, the truth struck him. 'What a fool I am! It's Cormack himself. We're early.' He glanced at his watch in the lamplight. 'No; Cormack's late for

his appointment—not like him. Some one else must have let Hubert in. . . . Hope he's been all right by himself in there. . . . I'll have to wait out here some time longer now. . . .'

Grouchy it was standing before the door, and Grouchy quivering with anger. 'Jim Benyon in there too! . . . I wonder,' he was thinking. 'I wonder! If he is, then there's no one who can play a straight game. . . . But why didn't he give an address? And going with Hubert too? Believe he is . . . God help him if he is! We'll see. . . . All there—Stone, Hubert, and Benyon, too! . . .'

All the doubt and terror of the day had been forgotten in the passion and deep suspicion of the moment. Every one Grouchy trusted had played him false. Jim Benyon was the last. Well, he didn't care what happened now—he would go through with it to the end. Nor did he care any longer what happened to himself. Confront these people here and now! That's what he would do. Yes, if they were in force, they would be able to do what they liked with him. He didn't care if Jim Benyon was in there too. And he must be there. Why else should he give no address? And round in this neighbourhood! . . . 'By God! If I could surprise them one by one! . . .' he murmured.

He looked grimly at the door. That was no good. Was there no other way he could get in? Down the area! He might break in there. He glanced quickly up the road. No one coming; only a man on the far side of the road, walking away. Now was the moment! He opened the gate in the

area railings and vanished down the steps into the darkness below. . . .

Benyon stopped. 'What's he playing at,' he wondered, 'rushing up to the front door like that, then going in another way? Forgot the front-door key, I suppose. But it didn't look like it. Anyway, why not knock if there's some one there to open the door? . . . They're all going crazy, I believe.' He turned round and walked very slowly, to give Grouchy plenty of time to enter the house, back to a point opposite the house, and then crossed the road again. He looked down into the darkness of the area. All was quiet down there. But, 'Hullo!' he thought, dimly seeing that a window down below stood open. He chuckled. 'Glad I looked down there. Should never have done so if you, Cormack, hadn't chosen to go in by the back way instead of by the front. I could get in easily through that window. And I will if you won't let me by any other way.' And, turning his back on the area, Benyon resumed his anxious wait.

'I regard your coming, my dear Hubert, as a charming declaration of your confidence in me,' Stone drawled when he had shut the front door and was ushering Marr along the unlit passage towards the dim lamplight of the back room. 'It shows that I have been so successful in the management of your affairs since the moment I first offered you my services, that your faith in my methods is not only undiminished, but actually enhanced. You now wish me to assume complete control, to act as I think fit, even to the extent of—" putting your dear uncle Cormack to sleep,"

shall I say, to borrow the phraseology of the R.S.P.C.A. What a testimonial this is! I shall use your name as a reference! Be seated, my dear Hubert.'

Marr had gone straight to the dying fire and now stood by it, bending forward, stretching out his hands towards the feeble warmth. When Stone stopped talking he gave vent to a hollow, elusive chuckle. Stone smiled benignly.

'You laugh!' he said. 'I agree. It's a charming, human little comedy. . . . But we will return to that directly. . . . You have brought the three thousand pounds with you, of course? Forgive my mentioning it almost in the same breath as my greeting, but we must remember that your visit is essentially upon business. Personally, I always believe in freeing one's mind of such distasteful subjects at the earliest moment possible. Let us, then, discuss that now. Afterwards we can chat.'

Marr, still leaning down over the fire, rubbed his hands together and gave another staccato chuckle which ended abruptly in a sob.

Stone frowned. That was a throaty noise of Marr's! Hysterics? There was no time for that sort of thing. He took Marr by the arm and led him to a rickety chair.

'Sit there,' he said roughly. 'And control yourself. We have no time to waste in whimpering.'

As Marr sank into the chair, Stone for the first time saw his face. He was grinning! His eyes roved uncomprehendingly around, his lips hung loosely open, slobbering.

Stone bent swiftly down, looked at him closely. Marr laughed! 'Mad!' thought Stone. 'So that's the trouble. Awkward, devilish awkward!' How long had he been like that? he wondered. He stared at him angrily for a moment, then whispered coaxingly in his ear:

'Three thousand. Three thousand. Where is it?'

He watched eagerly for the effect.

Marr looked puzzled. His lips moved slightly as though he was trying to say something. Nothing came.

Stone took him by the shoulder and shook him.

'Three thousand!' he repeated urgently. Again he waited.

Marr remained silent. He only tried to rise from the chair to avoid that restraining, dangerous hand.

Stone held him back.

'Three thousand! Three thousand! Three thousand!' he cried again, trying by dint of repetition to gain some entry into Marr's bewildered brain.

It was no use. Marr stared blankly at him. His lips fluttered slightly. Stone urged him on. But in the end nothing came.

Stone turned away exasperated. But suddenly he came back. Marr might have collapsed quite suddenly, he thought. He might actually have the money on him now! With one hand he held Marr's unresisting wrists, while with the other he ran a trained and sensitive touch over Marr's pockets. Nothing there! He cursed obscenely.

'I'll have to go without, that's all,' he thought. 'And I'd better clear out quickly, too. There's

no knowing what he might not have done or said if he's been on the verge of insanity for some time. They are dangerous like that.' He looked at Marr savagely. Little beast! It would serve him right if he finished him off before he went. It would be interesting, too, to see what effect the threat of death would have upon a mind in that condition! It was said that the mad could appreciate the fear of death. He laughed shortly. But there was no time for that sort of experiment. 'Better clear out while the going's good.' He shook his fist in Marr's face. 'Hope you get all you deserve after I'm well away,' he said, and turned to the door.

But just as Stone moved away, Marr found his voice. His moving lips formed audible words and he began to gabble incoherently.

'Outside,' he said in an awed voice, as though divulging a secret of critical importance. 'He's coming in. He's got it with him and he knows. . . . There's another way, perhaps . . . I'll tell you. . . . Calm yourself, old chap. You can kill him with a hat. . . . He'll be coming in presently because he knows; so it will all come right. Then you can have it. . . . Why don't you go and let him in, waiting outside there? Benyon's got it, I tell you; Benyon's got it all right. . . . That's what I want to know. . . . Three thousand. Let him in. Well, there you are—' the words tailed off into a mirthless chuckle.

Stone listened, hardly breathing. There was something at work in Marr's mind. Something more intelligible might come.

'Three thousand,' he murmured suggestively after a short silence.

Marr got up and walked towards the door.

'We'll go and let him in,' he muttered.

Stone stretched out a guarding hand.

'Oh, no, you don't, my beauty!' he said. 'Not just yet. I'm not so trustful as all that. You may not be quite so mad as you look! You'll just wait here while I go and have a look outside first and find out what it is you are gabbling about.' He pushed Marr back and, turning quickly, went out of the room, locking the door behind him.

Creeping into the darkness of the front room, Stone gingerly drew aside the curtain slightly and peered out of the window into the dim street beyond. Marr's rambling words must have been prompted by some remote memory, he thought, after a moment's searching. But there was no suspicious-looking person hanging about outside, as far as he could see; only a small man walking away on the far side of the road. But at that very moment, as Stone watched him, the man on the far side turned his head and glanced over at the house. Then he stopped, turned back, and, after a little hesitation, crossed the road. Under Stone's very eyes he came right up to the area railings, looked over into the well below and, finally, turned his back upon the house and took his stand there —waiting, waiting! Stone clenched his teeth. A watcher! So there was something real at the back of Marr's mind. Who was this man? Was he alone or were there more, close at hand, just out of sight? How much had Marr given away?

His fingers twitched convulsively. He let the curtain fall back, shutting out the sight of that man's back. He must act quickly. . . .

Stone stumbled through the darkness to the door of the back room, unlocked it and burst in upon Marr.

'A trap, is it?' he cried.

Marr, placidly mumbling to himself, looked up from a chair.

'Benyon's got it with him,' he repeated. 'Let him in.'

'You fool!' cried Stone, advancing. 'Do you think you can save yourself? Do you think I'll walk into a trap and leave you here—alive? Who's that, out there?'

Marr shrank away. 'Let him in,' he whimpered. 'Benyon's got it.'

'Who's Benyon?'

Marr, frightened at Stone's menacing tone, struggled for expression:

'He'll make it all come right,' he said excitedly. 'Three thousand—he's got it. Let him in. He wants to help.' He looked uneasily at Stone's evil grimace, his twitching, murderous fingers. He struggled to his feet. 'Well, let him in.' And with artless cunning he began to edge round Stone, keeping as far away from him as the room would allow. He took a few steps, but then fear overcame him utterly and he made a wild dash for the door.

Stone, watching for that move, shifted his position and intercepted him.

'Not yet, my friend,' he laughed. 'Not so quick. I've not done with you yet!'

Marr cringed away. Terror penetrated his shattered mind. For one brief second it seemed to produce lucidity.

'Let me go,' he cried. 'What are you going to do with me?'

Stone advanced upon him slowly, with hands outstretched.

'Talking sense at last! Frightened? I thought so. You hadn't the courage to outlast your part in this little trap.'

Marr opened his mouth to reply. But only husky noises came from him, breath forced wildly through an inarticulate throat, nightmare cries for help. He fled to a corner of the room, away from Stone's murderous hands.

Stone, grinning terribly, caught him there. He seized him by the throat and dragged him back to the open space before the hearth. 'You've acted once too often,' he whispered as his fingers delved into Marr's throat. 'I'll see you don't spoil my remaining chances of escape. . . . Once too often!' he repeated as he stifled a feeble shriek that at last found an exit from his victim's throat. 'Once too often—'

The words died on Stone's lips. He himself had heard a voice which brought terror to his own senses, that smote upon him like a far-off message from the dead: 'I swore to kill you, and I will.' And even as Stone listened he was borne back. Fierce hands had seized him by the throat, plunging deeply into his soft flesh.

Stone dropped his victim. Breaking free, he turned to meet his own aggressor. Like lightning, Grouchy was upon him again. Together

they wrestled, each fighting madly to secure a stranglehold. Locked together, they rolled and writhed upon the floor.

But suddenly Grouchy found the hold he sought and, kneeling across the prostrate form of Stone, leaned forward and added the weight of his body to that fatal grip. And he whispered close down by Stone's ear: 'This is the end. I said that I would kill you, and I will. You are going. Where are Benyon and your other friends? They're here, I know. Won't they come and save you? Deserted, are you? Only Hubert left for your protection, and you trying to kill him! Kick away, scratch, tear, rend—you're weakening! This will be your last fight!'

But Stone had strength left to struggle on. A sudden subtle twist, a great heave of his thighs and roll of his shoulders and the position was reversed. Stone now grinned down at Grouchy, pinned beneath him. And Death looked out of his eyes. . . .

Marr looked up from the hearth where he had fallen with desperate, maniac eyes. Arms and legs were flying wildly in one jumbled mass on the floor in the middle of the room. . . . Two pairs of legs and arms or one? He didn't know. But those writhing limbs were threatening him! That jumbled mass was attacking him! A hideous octopus that sought to kill! Those clawing limbs were stretching out for him! It was rolling closer, wriggling towards him across the floor! Terrifying monster! . . .

Madly he struggled to his feet, snatching up a heavy fire-iron as he rose. He was cornered! The

thing had almost reached him! It was still now, gathering itself for a final deadly lunge! It was speaking, whispering! . . . He raised the heavy iron above his head. . . . The monster heaved and rolled yet closer, right to his feet! . . . He swung the iron down with crashing force upon that horrible thing. . . . Two heads, one head? He couldn't tell. Kill this one first, the nearest. . . . He rained swift blows upon it. One head and half the jumbled body seemed to roll away, leaving the rest exposed. . . . Now for the other head. Kill both. Make sure. . . . He poised the deadly iron above his head to strike. . . . But suddenly a voice rang out; a dim, half-remembered voice calling his own name. He checked himself, wondering . . .

Grouchy, relieved of Stone's fierce strangle hold when the latter's shattered body had fallen away beneath Marr's blows, gazed up and dimly saw the coming blow. Weakly he raised a protective arm and cried: 'Hubert! Hubert!' No blow had fallen. Grouchy did not move.

At those words Marr had ceased his murderous battering and now stood waiting, the iron swung back behind his shoulders. He looked round vaguely. That voice; that cry! Some lingering memory was stirred. Whence had the voice come? He looked down, puzzled, at the creature lying deadly still now at his feet. Presently he trotted to the door and called out: 'Yes? I'm here,' and stood listening patiently for a reply. There was a movement behind him and that same voice spoke again, close by his shoulder. 'I called your name,' it said. 'You know me now? You remember?

. . . No? . . . But you stayed your hand. Something within you told you not to strike.'

Marr turned slowly. Some one was standing close beside him, speaking. What was he saying? He didn't know. But the voice soothed him. It seemed to satisfy some deep longing in him for he knew not what. He let the heavy iron be taken from him without resisting. Presently he murmured, 'I remember,' and seizing the man beside him by the hand, led him out into the passage, repeating in an urgent tone: 'We'll go and let him in. Now it will all come right.'

'It's high time something happened. I'll get going myself in a minute,' Benyon was thinking when a creak of the front door behind him warned him that something was happening. Turning, he saw Marr, chuckling contentedly, standing in the open doorway, and another man behind him dimly outlined in the shadows of the narrow hall. He stepped forward and gazed over Marr's shoulder at the man beyond. Who was he? he wondered. But suddenly he gave a cry. 'Cormack! At last! Clean-shaven! Yes, but I would know you; I had half expected that. I'm coming in now. I've a lot to say to you.' He pushed forward.

Grouchy stretched out an arm and barred the way. 'No,' he said, 'you cannot go in there. I'll listen to all you have to say—there's a lot I want to know. But somewhere else, not here.' He thrust Benyon back into the street and, coming out with Marr, slammed the door behind him. 'We'll leave the body where it lies,' he muttered.

Benyon caught the words. He clutched

Grouchy's arm, swung him round and gazed anxiously into his face. 'Body!' he exclaimed nervously. 'What is this?'

'In there,' Grouchy whispered. 'Stone is dead.'

Benyon shook his head. 'I do not understand,' he said. 'You are Stone.'

Grouchy looked at him sharply. 'It seems,' he replied, 'that I, also, have not fully understood. I thought you were in there with Stone—and knew and that you were—But come away. Let us go where we can both explain.'

'Come with me,' Benyon murmured, and spoke no more.

Along the endless streets they hurried in silence, Marr, at times, forced to break into a stumbling trot to keep the pace. At last they turned down Dover Street. Half-way down, Benyon let them into a quiet house and led the way up to his bachelor chambers on the second floor. He settled Marr down on a sofa, and then turning to Grouchy, broke the long silence at last. 'Here we can talk undisturbed,' he said. 'And I pray to God, Cormack, that you will have a story to tell that will plead forgiveness for the havoc you have wrought there.' He pointed to Marr's witless face.

For some moments Grouchy sat in silence. Then he said: 'I have sunk very low in your opinion, so it seems. But you have condemned me unheard. I think you will be able to forgive when you have heard the whole of my tale.'

For an hour Grouchy talked uninterrupted, his story punctuated by Benyon's exclamations of horror and amazement. But at last he came to the end and Benyon spoke.

'Yes, I misjudged you, Cormack,' he admitted. 'Who could say that you had acted wrongly when they had heard that ghastly story. Poor Hubert! And yet, does he deserve less?' He glanced over towards Marr, now sleeping peacefully on the sofa. 'He is peaceful now only because he cannot understand. . . . But what are we to do, Cormack? Can we hope that this tale of horror will end abruptly here? Hardly, I am afraid. But —' The sharp ring of the telephone just beside him cut him short. 'That will be Norris, I expect, to inquire when Hubert will return. What shall I say? . . . I know. We will have to begin our poor inventions right away. And here I begin aiding and abetting a multitude of crimes. But I will do it for you, Cormack. There are moments when we must be our own judges of right and wrong.' He lifted the receiver. 'Hullo! . . . Yes. . . . No, you need not wait up for Mr. Hubert, Norris. He has been here all evening with me and I'm afraid he is worse, if anything. I think I'd better keep him here for the night. . . . Yes, it's as bad as that. He's listening, but he doesn't understand. I'll keep him here and take him to a specialist first thing in the morning. Some arrangement will have to be made, I am afraid. . . . No, he's quiet. I shall be able to manage him, thank you. Yes, I suppose it was, bound to come in the end. . . . I know. . . . An unhappy time for us all, Norris. . . . I hope so, too. Goodnight.'

Benyon hung up the receiver. He looked at Marr and shook his head sadly. Turning to Grouchy he said: 'The faithful Norris hopes

Hubert may be speedily cured. While we, you and I, Cormack, must almost hope that he will remain always as he is now. Poor chap! But he, too, might wish it if he could understand. Mad, utterly mad! Yes, but he guards our dreadful secrets better so.' He thought for a while. 'You, Cormack, had better make your way to the sea now. You can employ and hide yourself there for a month or two. When the story of John Stone has been forgotten and you have grown your beard again, return. By then we will have had to think out some plausible explanation of your disappearance and return. It will not be easy, but doubtless it can be done. Meanwhile let's hope that the discovery of Stone's body will lead to the discovery of nothing more. I do not see how it can. And no one but ourselves knows that there were for a time two Stones. The man with the scar may remain an unsolved mystery. Let us hope, too, that if Hubert regains his sanity all that has happened while he has been insane or on the verge will have passed completely from his mind like a dream. There will then be no gap in our defences against discovery. Everything may yet come right and all be forgotten and forgiven.'

Grouchy rose and clasped Benyon's hand, his heart too full for speech.

In the early hours of the morning he slipped out of Benyon's flat and strode firmly away on his journey to the sea, to start his life afresh.

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THE MAN WITH THE SCAR

BY~

JOHN LOMAS